

Erie, Pennsylvania buried by more than five feet of snow

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A snow emergency has been declared for Erie, Pennsylvania and the surrounding area, as more than 62 inches of snow have fallen on the industrial city since a lake-effect storm began Saturday, blocking roads and causing power outages.

On Christmas Day, Monday, December 25, a record 34 inches of snow fell, followed by another 24 inches on Tuesday. Four more inches of snow fell on Wednesday and another four Thursday, as the storm was expected to taper off. Erie sits on the south shore of Lake Erie, part of the region, including Buffalo and Niagara Falls, New York, where winter storms pick up moisture as they pass above the lake waters, and then dump snow at the eastern end of the lake.

Like the fires raging in California and the hurricanes that hit Cuba, the Caribbean islands, Texas, Florida and Puerto Rico this fall, this powerful storm is another product of global warming. As the earth warms, Lake Erie freezes later into the season or not at all, and the warmer lake releases more moisture into the atmosphere, to come down as snow.

As of Wednesday, the storm had dropped 62.9 inches of snow on the city. In total, 97 inches of snow have fallen in December, beating by 30 inches the highest monthly snowfall since the National Weather Service started keeping such records back in the late 1800s.

Residents are urged to stay indoors and the National Guard has been brought in to assist with snow removal. Temperatures are in the teens, with wind chill in the single digits, and are expected to stay there for the next week or more.

The budget-strapped city has drafted employees from all departments to work 12-hour and even 16-hour shifts to assist in the clearing of snow. Complicating the problem are the many abandoned cars left in the streets as motorists became trapped in huge drifts.

Most of the national media is reporting this as a wonderful “White Christmas” story, with children home from school for the holidays and pictures of dogs playing in the snow and people looking from warm houses into snow-covered streets and fields. At worst, the record snow is shown as an inconvenience, stopping people from returning unwanted presents.

The reality is one of increasing social suffering: power outages, elderly residents trapped in their homes, shelters overflowing with the homeless population, and people unable to get to work, to the doctor, or to buy necessities.

The local electric utility is reporting scattered outages, but that is expected to grow as snow-laden trees fall onto power lines. Many residents will lose heating when their power goes out.

Area hospitals are opened and bracing for the emergency, as they are expecting to get people injured by the storm and suffering from the extreme cold. They reported that on Tuesday they had to send tow trucks along with ambulances to pull the ambulances through the snow back to the hospital.

Erie’s elderly are especially vulnerable, as they are locked in their homes and unable to get food, medicines or health care. About 13,000 residents are over 65 years of age. Erie’s total population is fewer than 100,000, the lowest in more than 100 years.

Chris, a young worker who lives in the city, told the WSWs, “The snow is waist deep where I live. They just plowed our road this morning. Neither my wife nor I was able to get to work yesterday. I am going to try and go to work this afternoon.”

Chris texted later that most of the city was still closed on Thursday and that he was stuck in a snow bank for over 40 minutes and still trying to get to work.

“Most people who couldn’t get to work won’t get

paid. Both my wife and I will lose a day's pay and that will be hard on our budget.

"The city only plowed the major roads so emergency vehicles could get through, they are just now getting to the secondary roads.

"It is pretty bad for the homeless. There is a network of churches that open up for the homeless when the weather is really bad, but I'm sure there will be people that didn't make it. We won't hear of any deaths on the news."

Homeless shelters report that they have taken in more people than they can fit, since they didn't want to turn people away into the cold and snow. The city does not operate any homeless shelters. All of the overnight shelters are run by churches or charities, and they had trouble getting the few staff they have or volunteers in to run the facilities. Most are only opened overnight, turning the residents out in the early morning.

"It's absolutely horrible, there are mountains and mountains of snow," said Joey Evans, who works at the Liberty House, a homeless shelter for veterans. "I don't think the city was prepared for this much snow this fast. If it was spread out over a longer time, we could have cleared it, but not this much this fast.

"We filled up just before the storm hit. If someone calls, we have to refer them to another shelter."

Curtis Jones, who is the program coordinator at the City Mission shelter, wanted people to know they still had a few beds. "We have 56 guys living here now," with another 38 staying at their other facility. "This afternoon, (Wednesday) we served over 200 people for lunch. There are several overflow centers that have opened up. Everyone is working hard so no one has to be sleeping on the streets through this."

Erie's one-day count of the homeless population was 1,183 in January 2015, dropping to 994 in 2016 before going back up in 2017 to 1,100. Overall, over 7,000 people are homeless at some point during the year. The city has a poverty rate of over 26 percent, twice the state average.

Poverty and homelessness, while not as high as within the city, exist throughout surrounding Erie County. The official poverty rate is 16.9 percent, or one in six residents.

"We have a large population of homeless children in grades one through five," explained Joey Evans. "That really worries me. There are many that are documented,

but there are also many that are undocumented.

"This is a problem that can be fixed. We need to bring homelessness among the youth down or it gets passed from generation to generation.

"Many will be sleeping on somebody's sofa or living room floor tonight. With some relative or friend of their parents. But a small percentage will be sleeping with their parents on the streets."



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