

Detroit water shutoffs to resume in midst of punishing heat wave

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The city of Detroit is set to resume water shutoffs after a one week pause over the July 4 holiday in the midst of a brutal heat wave affecting the entire region.

Two thousand households in Detroit have had their water service disconnected in the last six weeks, since the Detroit Water and Sewer Department (DWSD) officials announced they were resuming the brutal shutoff policy following the regular winter hiatus.

Lack of access to fresh water poses an urgent health threat under conditions where Detroit and large areas of the US and Canada are experiencing a summer heat wave. For low-income residents without air-conditioning, running water is crucial to hydrate and cool off.

Regular National Weather Service heat advisories have appeared in Detroit and nationally warning that high temperatures pose an acute danger to children, the elderly and health-compromised individuals. Along with a large swathe of the US, Detroit has experienced days of heat indexes in the 100 degree Fahrenheit (38 Celsius) range.

On Monday of this week, Detroit Water and Sewer Department (DWSD) officials announced a one-week pause in shutoffs for the July 4 holiday week. DWSD head Gary Brown claimed that the halt demonstrated that authorities were being “compassionate” for Detroit residents suffering from the heat. However, other reports indicated that the pause was not called because of the heat, but was due to the July 4 holiday falling on a Wednesday. In any event, there is nothing “compassionate” about the city shutoff policy, which is based on satisfying the relentless demands of wealthy holders of water bonds.

Detroit, Michigan is the poorest “large” city in the US, according to the US Census Bureau. Detroit has an overall poverty rate of 35.7 percent, and more than half

the children in Detroit live in families below the poverty level.

Some 10,000 total households so far this year have received the dreaded door hanger that gives a household a week to clear arrears before losing water service. Under these conditions, the narrative of Democratic Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan that the city is experiencing a “comeback” is obscene. While Duggan and billionaires like Quicken Loans founder Dan Gilbert talk of a revival, and millions of private and taxpayer dollars are sunk into the Downtown-Midtown entertainment area, distress in the neighborhoods continues.

Behind Duggan’s platitudes one can follow the money to the pockets of downtown and Midtown real estate interests. The \$260 million state subsidy for the Ilich family sports arena in Midtown alone totaled more money than the \$198 million cash deficit faced by the city of Detroit that was used as a justification for slashing jobs, services and the pensions of retired city workers in the 2014 bankruptcy.

Since the Detroit municipal bankruptcy devastated city workers’ pensions and jobs in 2014, the DWSD has issued water shutoff notices to over 100,000 residences. Between 2014 and 2017, Detroit saw more than one in seven of its 677,000 residents lose access to running water.

Working in tandem with Duggan to assure the water departments creditors, DWSD head Gary Brown claimed earlier this year that assistance programs would bring the shutoff numbers down.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Meeko Williams, chief director of Hydrate Detroit, a nonprofit organization that provides emergency water deliveries and water restoration help to Detroit families.

“Let’s be clear. For many years people have been

experiencing utility shutoffs and in the past few years it has gotten really much worse. Everybody is caught up with Downtown and Midtown revival, but it is in the neighborhoods that things are really still bad.

“The assistance programs to help with water bills are faulty. WRAP (Water Residential Assistance Program) and the other 10/30/50 assistance program are not affordable. You come down there and they don’t take care of arrears, don’t investigate miscalculated back bills, and in the end provide maybe \$4-\$14 of true assistance.

“You have to pay \$25 for six months while they freeze the arrearages, then if you make that you get half off the old charges. But here’s the catch. I have people with \$1,000 water bills that cannot get help.

“Since 2014, the bills have gone so high people cannot afford them anyway. Bills that used to average around \$70 are now \$90 a month because of rate hikes. There is now a four percent increase and the drainage fees have hit. That is another thing that happened because of the bankruptcy. It is the residents that are on the hook for the debts of DWSD. They have become the guarantors of the debt and if costs go up, the rates must go up to service that debt.”

Indeed, the Great Lakes Water Authority (GLWA) approved an average 1.7 percent rate increase in June. Among Detroit area communities that will be hardest hit are Inkster at 33.6 percent and Commerce Township at 24.8 percent.

Williams noted that rate hikes had impacted all those in the metro Detroit area who get water through the new Great Lakes Water Authority, created in the aftermath of the Detroit bankruptcy as a step toward the privatization of the DWSD.

“As of June 1, the water assistance ran out of money and shut off the application process. More money is supposed to be coming in for WRAP, but this is really a charity. It works with an agency that has some sort of connection with the city. WRAP started with a one million dollar grant from a philanthropist to the United Fund and now everything seems to be going through this third party agency, Wayne Metro, to deal with this money. [Detroit Mayor Mike]Duggan is leading the board there.

“I will give you some examples of people that have come to me. The problems people have paying their bills have changed since the bankruptcy, too. First it

started with people with these big arrearages that the title company should have cleared up. Now, because bills are so high and poverty is so bad, water is simply unaffordable and people cannot pay the monthly bill.

“All of these things that try to tell them that they have to think about the public are going nowhere. As I said on my Facebook page recently, they are concerned with representing the people with money. Water relief, amnesty, all of it is going nowhere. Nothing has gone anywhere since the bankruptcy was ruled in 2014.”

The day after the July 4 holiday, local television stations reported that a woman on Detroit’s west side had just received a bill for 90,000 gallons of water. Her normal usage was 6-7000 gallons and spiked, for no reason, to 29,000 gallons in May.



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