

# Woman dies after New Jersey utility cuts off her electricity

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Linda Daniels, a 68-year-old woman who needed an oxygen tank to breathe, died at her home in Newark, New Jersey, after the Public Service Electric and Gas (PSE&G) Company turned off her electricity. The company claimed that Daniels owed \$1,500—an alleged debt that it saw as sufficient reason to deprive her power for her oxygen machine. In New Jersey, it is illegal for utility companies to turn off power to customers with medical emergencies.

Daniels is survived by her two children, five grandchildren, and seven great-grandchildren.

The criminality of the electric company has provoked outrage among family members and throughout the South Ward of Newark, where Daniels lived. The struggle to keep the power on is acutely felt in Newark, where over 28 percent of the population lives in poverty and the typical family income is just 40 percent the state average.

The power went off at Daniels's home at about 10 a.m. on Thursday, July 5. As the temperature outside rose to 91 degrees, the home became warmer. Desiree Washington, Daniels's daughter, arrived at her mother's house after the power was cut and found the heat difficult to bear. "I'm ex-military, but I couldn't even take a breath," she told the *New York Times*. Daniels was frightened and gasping for air. To keep her mother cool, Washington applied ice packs to her sides and fanned her.

Many members of the family called PSE&G shortly after the power was cut off and continued to call throughout the day, begging for the power to be restored. They told the company that Daniels had congestive heart failure and needed oxygen. PSE&G said that they would send a truck, but none came. "They started getting nasty after awhile," Daniels's granddaughter Mia told nj.com. The company

ultimately told the family to stop calling.

Unable to use her oxygen tank, Daniels switched to a smaller tank that she kept in reserve. When that tank became empty, the family called the paramedics, who brought a portable oxygen tank. Despite this assistance, Daniels continued to gasp for air. "She was scared, and she was holding our hands tightly," said Washington. "She was horrified. We were all horrified."

After hours of desperate struggle, Daniels died at 4:23 p.m. "She suffered and she passed right in front of us. She was gasping until the time she died," said Mia.

As if to mock the grieving family, the promised utility truck finally arrived on Friday morning. Power was restored to the deceased's home at 8:30 a.m.

In a statement, PSE&G said it had turned off Daniels's power because she had not made payments for months. "As part of our policy, PSE&G had notified this customer numerous times that their account was in arrears and that they would be scheduled for a service termination unless the account was made current," Jim Namiotka, a company spokesman, told nj.com. The utility company made "at least 26 attempts to notify the customer since January 2018, including two visits to the residence, prior to the disconnection," it said in the statement.

But the family had made a \$500 payment on Monday, July 3—two days before PSE&G turned off the electricity. They also had made payments of more than \$250 each in April, May, and June. "We haven't stopped paying," said Washington. "Everybody was praying for her not to suffer, but how can you not suffer under those circumstances? How could you not suffer? It's just unbelievable."

Namiotka also claimed that the family had not told PSE&G about Daniels's medical problems until after the power had been cut off.

The family flatly denies this account, saying that they had informed the company in writing about Daniels's medical problems. In 2016, the family wrote to PSE&G to notify the company that Daniels had begun using a machine to treat sleep apnea. Furthermore, Daniels was receiving hospice care, and her nurses also updated PSE&G about her condition. In April, the nurses informed the company that Daniels was now using an oxygen tank.

PSE&G has promised to conduct a "complete investigation of this matter." The state's Board of Public Utilities is investigating Daniels's death as well.

The criminal electricity shutoff in Newark comes amid an aggressive wave of utility shutoffs around the country. California, Texas and New York have all experienced record levels of shutoffs in recent years. The victims of shutoffs are members of the working class and the consequences are predictably tragic.

The Detroit Water and Sewerage Department has been shutting off workers' water for years to pressure them into making payments or leaving the city so that developers can gentrify areas. These scandalous shutoffs put the health of residents, particularly the young, elderly, and sick, at risk.

In 2015, Delmarva Power cut off the electricity for utility worker Rodney Todd, a financially struggling father of seven in Maryland, most likely because of unpaid bills. Todd set up a gas-powered generator to keep the lights on. He and his children were later found dead, apparently of carbon monoxide poisoning.

These tragedies make plain the fact that utility companies, public and private, are unconcerned with human dignity or even human life. Under capitalism, a company's sole and relentless focus necessarily must be on maximizing profits and minimizing expenses. Every other consideration is a nonissue.

Not only is capitalism unable to provide for those in need, it is driven to extract profit even from the most vulnerable. That Daniels, Todd, and others paid with their lives is immaterial to the utility companies. It does not merit even a line item on their balance sheets.



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