

# Extreme cold spell wreaks havoc across United States

Niles Niemuth  
1 February 2019

Deadly cold air flows from the Arctic continued to wreak havoc across the US Thursday, claiming lives and pushing critical electrical and natural gas infrastructure past its breaking point, resulting in the idling of auto assembly plants in Michigan.

Millions of students were out of school for another day, Thursday, and businesses remained closed, with building heating systems unable to overcome the frigid temperatures; mail service was suspended throughout much of the Midwest for a second day. Thousands of airline flights have been canceled across the region.

The weather pattern known as the polar vortex brought freezing temperatures to 212 million people across the United States, and extreme sub-zero temperature to approximately 83 million people, with the Midwestern states bearing the brunt. An estimated 3.5 million people in the states of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois and Michigan experienced temperatures below negative 30 degrees Fahrenheit (-34 Celsius) by Thursday morning.

A weather station in Mt. Carroll, Illinois, an hour northeast of the Quad Cities, recorded a temperature of -37 degrees Thursday; if officially certified by the National Weather Service it would be the lowest temperature ever recorded in the state.

The deep freeze and increased demand for heat pushed electrical grids and natural gas distribution networks past their breaking points, putting millions at risk of freezing in their homes. Natural gas usage in the lower 48 states hit an all-time daily high Wednesday with an estimated 145.2 billion cubic feet consumed.

A fire which broke out Wednesday at a Consumers Energy natural gas compressor plant in Macomb County, north of metro Detroit, resulted in a gas shortage which put many in the region at risk of losing heat in their homes. A statement put out on the utility's

Twitter account warned that, "without additional reductions, we run the risk of not being able to deliver natural gas to families and critical facilities across Michigan—a scenario none of us want to encounter."

An emergency cellphone text message was sent to every resident in southeastern Michigan directing them to reduce the heat in their homes to 65 degrees to avoid overtaxing the distribution system. Governor Gretchen Whitmer repeated the appeal for residents to turn down their thermostats until noon Friday, "So that we can get through this storm with minimal harm."

GM suspended operations at seven of its plants across the state Wednesday night and many remained idled Thursday to ease the demand for natural gas. Ford lowered the temperature at two of its plants which are supplied with gas by the utility, leaving workers to work in the cold.

Natural gas shortages in parts of Minnesota caused Xcel Energy to ask all of its customers in the state to reduce their thermostats to 63 degrees overnight Wednesday. As many as 160 people in Princeton, Minnesota were evacuated from their homes and moved to hotel rooms paid for by Xcel Tuesday night as the natural gas system failed.

More than 5,000 people were left without power for several hours in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota as the extremely cold temperatures caused power poles to fracture. Freezing insulators and fuses and falling power lines caused power outages for hundreds of people across southern Wisconsin. Several hundred people in Flint, Michigan lost power during the day Wednesday.

With temperatures approaching all-time lows, frost quakes were reported in Chicago, as underground water rapidly froze, causing the earth to shift. Commuter rail service was disrupted and Amtrak trains to and from

the city were canceled as the subzero temperatures caused rails to contract as well as other mechanical issues. The Illinois Department of Public Health reported that at least 30 people had been admitted to emergency rooms across the state Wednesday morning with frostbite or symptoms of hypothermia.

As of this writing at least 12 deaths have been officially attributed to the cold-spell.

Gerald Belz, an 18-year-old University of Iowa pre-med student, died in a hospital Wednesday after being found unresponsive outside a campus building. Temperatures in Iowa City, where the campus is located, plunged to -26 degrees Fahrenheit Wednesday, 40 degrees below average.

In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where the wind chill reached -47 degrees Wednesday, the body of a 38-year-old woman was found frozen in her unheated home. Emergency responders reported that the home's thermostat had malfunctioned.

The body of a 69-year-old FedEx worker was found by another employee Thursday morning collapsed between two semi-trucks at a delivery hub in East Moline, Illinois. While an autopsy has yet to be done the police told local media that weather was a factor in his death.

Three bodies of elderly men were found at various outdoor locations around the Detroit metropolitan area. Coroners could not determine whether these deaths were weather-related until they had thawed sufficiently to allow autopsies to be performed.

Homeless shelters and warming centers were filled past capacity for a second night in a row across the Midwest.

The largest homeless shelter in Chicago, the Pacific Garden Mission, has been providing beds for some 800 people since Tuesday. Shelters have also filled up in Rockford, Illinois, northwest of Chicago, where 74 men, 35 women and eight children sought shelter at the Rockford Rescue Mission. United Caring Services in Evansville, Indiana provided shelter to 51 people, including a number of children.

St. John's Homeless Shelter in Green Bay, Wisconsin provided shelter to 85 people Tuesday night and remained open all day Wednesday to help the homeless stay out of the bitter cold. "The need is significant. It's higher than it's been throughout most of the other winter months," executive director Alexia Wood told

WBAY. "So, people are just looking to escape the cold."

Despite emergency efforts by cities and charities across the Midwest to add beds to shelters, many homeless individuals and families were left without any good options for keeping out of the elements, putting many at risk of death.

The body of a 60-year-old woman was found early Wednesday frozen in a vacant home in Lorain, Ohio, west of Cleveland. The county coroner told the *Chronicle-Telegram* that she had likely died of hypothermia and had been squatting in the building without heat or other utilities for several months.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**