

Callous government policies lead to freezing death of homeless man in Edmonton, Alberta

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A passerby discovered the frozen body of a homeless man in a park next to an Edmonton subway station February 3. It was one of the coldest nights of the year, with temperatures falling to -37 C.

Apart from the statement that the body was that of a man, and that the police believed that his death was “cold related,” there was nothing else said about this person. We do not know if he was young or old, whether or not he had a family, or anything else about his life.

Underscoring the authorities’ indifference to the man’s fate, none of the officials interviewed following the death, including Edmonton’s mayor, described it as a tragedy or expressed any remorse. Yet the death was entirely avoidable. It was the result of a callous policy adopted by the city to shut subway stations at night to prevent homeless people from sheltering inside.

In the past, Edmonton opened its subway stations after hours during extreme cold conditions so homeless people could shelter inside. However, city officials decided only to keep the subway stations open if the vacancy rate in the city’s privately-run hostels dropped below 10 percent. To justify this policy, officials complained that they had spent too much money cleaning up the garbage left behind by homeless people seeking shelter and were having to hire security guards to make sure that no violence broke out.

Officials also absurdly advised homeless people that if they could not make it to a shelter independently, they could call the police, who would transport them to one.

Many homeless people prefer to avoid homeless shelters because they want to stay with a partner, spouse, or pet, or they just want their own personal space.

The shelters only allow homeless residents to stay the

night, preaching bible verses to them at 6:00 a.m. the next morning before sending them back out into the cold. From there, homeless people are forced to fend for themselves during the day by crouching down in parking garages, apartment building lobbies, parkade stairwells, tents, bus shelters or sewer lines. In such severe weather, however, this often leads to frostbite in fingers, toes or limbs.

Hospital staff have commented that homeless people can have many body parts amputated throughout a severe winter, because as soon as their amputations have been performed, they are discharged back out into the cold.

The exact number of deaths that can be attributed to Edmonton’s policy change is unclear. While the death of the man February 3 made it onto the news, this was only because his body was found in a parking lot in full view of hundreds of passers-by. Shortly before Christmas, the body of another man was found in a field near the Queen Elizabeth School. As one firefighter explained, “It’s not like the papers are going to do a write up on every dead homeless person.”

At the beginning of 2017, the City of Edmonton initiated a study of the homeless and found that there were 1,720 people experiencing chronic homelessness throughout the city. The authorities launched a program pledged at ending chronic homelessness by the end of 2019. With less than a year to go in the project, there are still 660 chronically homeless people who are staying in shelters or sleeping on the streets. This figure is likely an underestimate, due to the fact that there are so many homeless people sleeping in mobile camps.

In truth, Edmonton’s homelessness problem could have been resolved years ago. The city’s claim that it has been “running out of money” in its budget is a flat-out lie. In 2014, the City of Edmonton built a new

hockey arena for \$600 million. Moreover, the city spends more money dismantling homeless camps than it is spending on the project to eliminate chronic homelessness.

Alberta's provincial New Democratic Party government is equally committed to austerity and cutting spending for critical social services. Since coming to power in 2015, the NDP has cut health and social spending, while at the same time offering big business tax handouts and other incentives to help boost the oil industry's multi-billion-dollar profits.

Alberta has seen dramatic increases in the unemployment rate in the last few years due to falling oil prices. This hasn't stopped oil company executives from raking in multi-million-dollar bonuses. The economic downturn has forced many people out of their homes, and others have succumbed to mental illness or opiate drug use. In 2017, 40 percent of all drug or alcohol overdose deaths in Edmonton were recorded as having no fixed address.

In the past, people suffering from mental illnesses or drug addictions could be treated in a mental health facility. However, the NDP government has been closing beds in the public mental health facilities that treat mental disorders and drug addictions. In March 2017, a group of psychiatrists sent an open letter to the government describing the move to close mental health facilities as "disastrous." This fell on deaf ears.

At the federal level, the Trudeau government issued a meaningless declaration in late 2017 stating that housing is a right. However, its housing proposals are largely predicated on forking over billions of taxpayer dollars to building companies and property developers. This will do nothing to help the tens of thousands of people across Canada who go to sleep at night without a roof over their heads.



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