

Detroit reverses water shutoffs

Michigan governor declares state of emergency after state's first two coronavirus cases confirmed

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In the face of growing public concern over the coronavirus pandemic, public officials in Michigan have announced a series of emergency actions including the declaration of a statewide emergency and the suspension of Detroit's brutal water shutoff policy.

On Tuesday night, hours after over a million people turned out to vote in the state's Democratic primary, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer declared a state of emergency as she announced the state's first two confirmed cases of the coronavirus COVID-19 in Oakland and Wayne counties.

Wayne County Executive Warren Evans told the press that the Wayne County patient, a middle-aged man with a recent history of domestic travel, was in isolation. The Oakland County resident, a middle-aged woman with a recent history of international travel, is being treated in Ann Arbor at the University of Michigan Health System. As of this writing the state of Michigan was monitoring 124 possible cases of exposure.

The governor's announcement followed the decision Monday by Democratic Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan to reverse of the city's longstanding water shutoff policy. Over 141,000 homes have had their water shut off over inability to pay bills since 2014. The action, an abrupt reversal of a brutal policy in effect for more than five years in the face of worldwide condemnation, undoubtedly reflected acute fear of a potential social explosion.

In a lame state address concerning the outbreak Whitmer offered little but empty platitudes, noting, "The coronavirus has the potential to impact our lives

and nearly every aspect of our lives."

She continued, "We're Michiganders. We're tough. We know how to take care of each other. We will get through this. But for now, please make sure your families and friends are taking every preventative measure available to keep yourselves safe. Talk to your friends and your family and your coworkers and encourage them to make smart choices."

The "smart choices" available include washing hands, covering coughs and not touching faces. She encouraged campuses and employers to "use their best judgment about what steps are most appropriate to keep people safe and slow the spread of the disease," and that businesses should "support" workers who are sick. No emergency funds have been made available for workers who do not have paid time off or sick leave.

"These are the first known cases of COVID-19 here in the state of Michigan," Dr. Joneigh Khaldun, chief medical executive and chief deputy for health, said following Whitmer's address. "It is very likely that we will see more cases and that there will be community spread."

The state of Michigan is entirely unprepared to deal with the growing coronavirus pandemic. The patient to primary care physician ratio across the state is 1,254 to one. In the city of Detroit, 45.1 percent of residents rely on bare bones Medicaid coverage for their health needs.

Whitmer's declaration of emergency entailed the creation of "four task forces comprising key state government agencies to coordinate the state's response and work closely with the appropriate community and non-governmental stakeholders."

The unserious response of the state was highlighted when on February 28, the Michigan Department of Military and Veterans Affairs set up an Emergency Operations Center at a military base in Fort Custer. The facility has just 20 beds. Michigan's population is nearly 10 million people. Earlier this week the in-house congressional doctor predicted 70–150 million COVID19 cases in the United States alone.

Many of the state's colleges are either extending spring break and discouraging students from returning to campus or holding classes online until further notice. Michigan State University, near the state capital, Lansing, moved all classes online Wednesday morning after announcing a probable case of coronavirus linked to the campus. Classes are potentially scheduled to resume in-person on April 20. The Universities of Michigan in Flint, Dearborn and Ann Arbor shortly followed suit, as well as Wayne State University in Detroit, Oakland University in the northern Detroit suburb of Rochester Hills, and Michigan Technological University in the state's Upper Peninsula.

State officials followed up the governor's declaration with their own statements and cancellations, including Detroit Mayor Duggan who announced that the city's historic St. Patrick's Day parade would be canceled. "As long as COVID-19 remains a health concern, no Detroit residents should have concerns about whether their water service will be interrupted," Duggan declared in a statement, indicating that should the coronavirus retreat, the water shutoff policy will resume.

The Whitmer administration had to this point refused to make a dime in state money available to help Detroit residents struggling with their water bills. Just last month Whitmer ignored a request from the Detroit City Council to institute a moratorium on the water shutoffs. Now, with breathtaking hypocrisy she declares that halting and reversing shutoffs is "the right thing to do to keep families safe and protect public health."

In 2017, health experts warned of an incoming public health crisis should the city continue to refuse running water to its residents. The shutoffs continued unabated until two days ago. But the city's action comes with a price: those without water will have to pay \$25 for restoration and \$25 a month toward their unpaid debts, a not insignificant amount for many residents of the poorest big city in America. For 30 days, the state says

it will cover the \$25 fee for those who cannot afford it, though it is unclear who qualifies.

Given that nearly one-quarter of the city's residents subsist on less than \$10,000 a year, the number could be substantial.

In a damning self-indictment of the cruelty and barbarity of his administration's water shutoff policy Mayor Duggan conceded, "There is no financial reason anyone in the city of Detroit should have water shut off."

Detroit Water and Sewage Department Director Gary Brown said in a news release: "We know that washing hands is an important defense to this virus, so for the duration of the COVID-19 situation, DWSD is implementing this plan to help make sure every Detroiter has access to clean running water."

Three weeks ago Brown penned an editorial for the *Detroit Free Press* in which he blamed the city's poverty-stricken residents for attempting to scam the payment system. "What we can't support—and we believe most of our customers and Detroiters will agree—is to allow water and sewer services to go unpaid by ending the ability to use service interruptions as a collection tool of last resort."

Parroting this line in an attempt to justify the shutoffs over the last six years, Duggan told the press, "As of Wednesday the only residents in the city of Detroit who don't have water on will be those who don't reach out. It won't be for lack of money."



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