

As temperatures plummet and pandemic rages, homelessness in Michigan poised to explode

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Suffering is dramatically increasing as winter starts during the upsurge of the COVID-19 crisis across the United States. The economic impact has fallen on the working class; wages are falling and protections from eviction are set to expire in less than a week—a period of time which would be extended only for another month should the “relief” bill passed by Congress be signed into law. Already landlords have initiated tens of thousands of legal proceedings to force tenants from their homes for their inability to pay. Homelessness, already impacting hundreds of thousands of adults and children, is poised to explode.

Michigan, once among the more prosperous states, with its concentration of automobile assembly and parts plants, but today well below the median in terms of household income, is particularly affected. Homelessness is growing in cities and towns across the state.

The local NBC affiliate in Kalamazoo, WOOD-TV, reported earlier this month on a homeless encampment that has doubled in size from 12 tents to more than two dozen since the spring. Not far from the Pfizer facility producing COVID-19 vaccines—the largest plant in pharmaceutical behemoth Pfizer’s operations—and the headquarters of medical device giant Stryker, workers who have been unable to afford their homes and apartments are camping out in the cold, with relief coming only from working class volunteers who arrive to bring food, firewood, and help as best they can. One resident told WOOD-TV that she had taken to placing her tent within a larger tent that might act as a wind-stop. “I am cold all the time,” she said.

Homelessness in Michigan is widespread. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH),

there were 8,575 people that experienced homelessness in the state on any given night in 2019. For the US as a whole, that number is 500,000. This number could easily balloon into the millions if the national eviction moratorium expires at the end of December or January.

Federal funding remains a pittance in comparison to the scale of homelessness. The misnamed CARES Act, passed in March chiefly to prop up financial markets, provided \$4 billion in funding for homeless services. Steve Berg, vice president for programs and policy for the NAEH, told NBC News that \$15 billion was actually needed simply to address the increase in homelessness in 2020 that has been caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and associated hemorrhaging of jobs.

Other cities in Michigan, large and small, have seen the need for shelter grow throughout the year. Chad Audi, president of Detroit Rescue Mission Ministries told the *Detroit Free Press* that one site had an overflow capacity limit of 125 beds. In previous years, bed usage always lessened in summer with warmer weather. But this year it never dipped below 120. Meanwhile, in Traverse City, a popular tourist destination but with a relatively small population of about 16,000, a memorial walk was held on Monday to remember the 13 homeless people who died on the streets there this year. Nationally, this number is estimated at about 13,000.

At the start of December, MLive reported on a homeless encampment in Grand Rapids, Michigan’s second largest city. The camp was set up when the nearby shelter at Mel Trotter Ministries filled, in part due to pandemic-related distancing requirements and capacity restrictions. Notwithstanding donations from

the local community, conditions are rapidly worsening with the start of winter weather. Ann Maxlow, a Grand Rapids resident living at the camp told the reporter about the rudimentary conditions: “It’s freezing. It’s really thin. Rain gets in there. Snow gets in there. It’s just really horrible. And it’s freezing. It’s just a nightmare.”

A worker at a homeless shelter in Washtenaw County, Jane, told the WSWs that the severity of the situation facing the homeless is worsening quickly. With public buildings and restaurants closing for a greater proportion of the day, there are fewer areas to keep warm and wash hands, both of which are necessary to protect from COVID-19. “There is a ‘ticking clock’ we face in terms of capacity,” she added.

“Right now, it centers on two things. If there is an uptick in COVID-19 in the area, and it looks like there will be, we do not have enough space to quarantine everyone at the center, and there is a real risk of exposure,” Jane noted. “But on the other hand, the lack of space will likely keep some people away for fear of getting exposed potentially, so they run the risk of freezing to death outside. These are big concerns for us now. We don’t get to give everyone their own little safe spot. We follow social distancing guidelines, but we can only do so much if there are more ‘super-spreader’ events in the area.”

The contradiction between the growth of homelessness and the growth of opulence in the US during the pandemic is unmistakable. As the WSWs has reported, the wealth of the billionaires has grown by \$141 billion from only March to October of this year. At the same time, it is estimated that US homelessness could be ended by extending the federal voucher system that allows some families to pay 30 percent of their income toward rent while the state pays the balance. Such an expansion would cost an additional \$41 billion per year as total funding limits currently mean that 75 percent of those eligible for such vouchers do not receive them because of the cap on total funding imposed by Congress. This amount is less than 30 percent of the increase in the wealth of the 644 billionaires for only part of the year.

It would be naïve in the extreme, however, to expect such a change from a ruthless ruling elite in the US that is represented by both Democratic and Republican

parties. Their lack of concern for the more than 320,000 lives lost in the US to COVID-19—and the additional quarter million expected to perish this winter—is ample proof that they will not seriously consider programs to end homelessness which costs the lives of 13,000 each year and traumatizes hundreds of thousands of others. This task of securing shelter for everyone falls to the working class as part of its fight for socialism, to stop the money-mad capitalist class by taking political power and reorganizing society to meet social need.



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