

After nearly two weeks much of Jackson, Mississippi still without running water

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Nearly half of the residents of Jackson, Mississippi have now been without water for nearly two weeks following the severe winter storm that froze pipes and burst water mains all over the city. The same storm knocked out power and water service for millions of people in Texas and impacted neighboring Louisiana.

Tens of thousands of people living in Mississippi's capital city have had no running water for drinking or washing clothes or indoor plumbing, and water distribution sites have been set up across the region.

Hundreds of residents have crowd into long lines, either standing outside or waiting in their vehicles, in order to receive bottles and jugs of much needed water. Some people have even reported having to purchase bottled water for as much as \$100.00 as the city's crumbling infrastructure has resulted in massive demands and scarce resources.

The poverty rate of Jackson is estimated to be around 26.9 percent. Many residents have lost work and income due to the pandemic and others have been forced out of work more recently due to the havoc caused by the winter storms. For most who have lost service, being able to afford bottled water is a significant challenge.

For local chef Erika Williams, being forced to collect melting snow in order to flush the toilet, stand in line for hours with a bucket for water distribution, and paying exorbitant prices for bottled water has lead to real anger and frustration with the local government.

"The thing that became frustrating was the tone of accountability just wasn't there," Williams told the *Daily Beast*. "There was no plan that we could see. The press conferences were redundant. If you don't know when it's coming back, what is being done to help us?"

Indeed, ten days now since the first water outages, there is still no clear timetable from city officials for

when safe running water will return. Many residents who have low water pressure are still under boil water advisories from over a week ago as the water that is running is not yet safe to ingest.

According to local reports, there have been 33 suspected water main breaks as of the most recent account and at least 10 confirmed breaks.

Summer Williams, Jackson resident and eight-months-pregnant mother-to-be, told 16 WAPT News of the emotional distress under which the crisis has placed her. "It scares me. It really does. I don't know, I'm probably gonna even have to leave Jackson until everything gets situated and just go stay with my mom," Williams said. "I get emotional about it, sometimes I cry. It's like our apartments didn't even warn us about the water. It just stopped working."

According to Democratic Mayor Chokwe Antar Lumumba, there are no exact numbers for how many residents are without running water. Some regions have been hit worse than others, and in many neighborhoods a full restoration of water service is not yet on the horizon.

Public Works Director Charles Williams told a press conference on Sunday, "Our system has basically crashed like a computer and now we're trying to rebuild it." One method the city is using to gather stores of water is to open fire hydrants across the city in order to fill tanks so water can be distributed elsewhere.

City officials estimate the costs for upgrading the city water system to be in the lower billions—\$2 billion according to Mayor Lumumba—yet the city council has only set aside about \$15 million dollars a year toward the issue through a sales tax increase of about one percent.

On Thursday, Mississippi Republican Governor Tate Reeves sent the National Guard to Jackson with tankers

of non-potable water for flushing toilets in one of the first signs of aid from the state.

Many residents have taken to social media to express their frustrations and raise national awareness of the city's water crisis.

One Twitter user expressed her anger directly on the governor's account, calling for more national attention and government assistance, "The fact that people haven't had water for 3 weeks should spark some type of outrage. The fact that @tatereeves had to be begged to step in is pitiful. The fact that he denied a bill last year saying even though people don't have water they still have to pay a water bill is sick." Her tweet continued, "It's how half the city STILL doesn't have running water and if they do have it then the pressure is very low. Where is the government assistance??"

Others went to the city's official Facebook pages in droves to express their outrage. Resident Dwight Pugh wrote, "Day 12 and not even a drip at my house, NEVER have we had [water] disrupted this long."

Disputes between local and state government officials have also flustered residents who expressed anger at the slow response of local and state assistance. Lumumba reportedly told residents that the governor was not returning his calls for help, yet the governor's office said no such calls were made.

Mayor Lumumba, who admits that the city has water mains that are over 100 years old, declared that the water system crisis will not be fixed easily or very soon. "The challenges of aging infrastructure are not new to Jackson, but this is different. This was an act of God that sent old systems into havoc resulting in severe water outages and trauma for our residents," Lumumba said in a press statement. "Our systems were never meant to endure days of ice storms and sub-zero temperatures coupled by road conditions that prevented the delivery of critical supplies."

Governor Reeves agrees with the mayor on this point. He admitted in an earlier statement that the water system in Jackson has been neglected for over 50 years and "is not something that we are going to fix in the next six to eight hours."

However, the current disaster was not the result of an unforeseeable "act of God." City officials have known for years that the public water and sewage system was in desperate need of repair and without significant investment would collapse under the pressure of such a

winter storm.



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