

Photo essay with interviews

Dearborn, Michigan residents languish without government assistance in flooding aftermath

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On June 25–26, heavy rains overwhelmed the Detroit, Michigan metro area's shoddy infrastructure system, causing flash floods and power outages throughout the region. Just three weeks after the first flood, many were hit again with rain and sewage water pouring into basements for the second time in less than a month.

One of the worst-hit areas is Dearborn, a working-class suburb of Detroit. The city opened up a Disaster Relief Center at the Henry Ford Centennial Library on July 23 where those impacted by the flooding can apply for assistance. Nearly 70,000 people are expected to apply for assistance.

Many residents never fully recovered from historic flooding in 2014 which severely damaged homes and businesses. Most received little to no assistance from either the insurance companies or the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and many residents who spoke with the WSWs are finding the 2021 situation to be no different.

Trash lines the streets. Furniture, carpets, appliances and floorboards are attracting flies. Much of the garbage, soaked in raw sewage, has been rotting in the sun on the curb in some cases for several weeks. The stench, in particular in the city's South End neighborhood, is overwhelming and a major cause of concern for the health hazard that it poses to residents and their families.

On Saturday evening, just hours after these interviews were collected, severe weather hit southeastern Michigan and the same scenes emerged again. Over 125,000 households were without power through Sunday evening; major freeways were flooded, cars abandoned underwater and more sewage and rainwater gushed into homes.

Mohamed is a mechanic. He has lived in Dearborn his whole life. He lost the entire contents of his basement in 2014 and was hit by both of last month's floods. He did not receive insurance money or federal assistance in 2014 and is not expecting help this time around. He and his wife were hauling parts of their basement to the curb when he spoke with the WSWs.

"A sewage backup happened in the basement. It was just shooting out the toilets, the drains, everywhere it could come out—it was up to my waist. Everything was damaged. We had to get rid of everything. Everything, everything, *everything* is gone. One guy estimated \$60,000; another estimated \$55,000 in damages."

He explained how residents have been instructed to wait for insurance company or FEMA representatives to assess damage before tearing out waterlogged drywall, which has allowed the mold to grow. "I can't sit and just wait around anymore. We sent my son to my brother's house [to get away from the mold]. Now I am clearing it all up so I don't get sick from the mold. This is a major, major health issue.

"Our trash had been sitting here for two weeks. In fact they just came to pick it up this morning. What are we going to do? It took too long and it got piled up so bad in the streets that I had to take it to the city dump. Everyone on this block had the same thing happen. What are people supposed to do? The City of Dearborn does not want to comply with nobody, they are all hiding. People cannot live like this."

He gestured at the growing pile of debris sitting at the curb. "This is just one load out of four that I took to the dump. We had to throw away everything."

He described how the floods happened. "When it was going on this time they had all the sewage systems closed. They had the firetrucks going around to open them back up and after about three or four hours it slowly, slowly started to drain again.

"The thing about it is, Dearborn *knew* about the flood. But they did not warn nobody. Everybody here could tell you the same thing: the city *knew* it was a flood possibility but they did not mention it to anybody.

"In 2014 we lost everything and now again, everything. I cannot go through this again. I'm honestly at the point where I am trying to move out of Dearborn. I cannot deal with it any more—getting flooded twice in one month. The first time it was rainwater and sewage, the second time it was all sewage. I stayed for a whole week cleaning all this up.

"The city of Dearborn does not want to do nothing about it. You cannot go by what anybody says nowadays. They do not care. Nobody cares here, I'm telling you. The neighbors look out for each other, but neighbors can only help so much, you can only do so much. And look, when you are flooded and your neighbor is flooded, what can you do? Life goes on, it doesn't stop."

He gestured at the Ford Motor Company headquarters across the street. "They do not care. If there is money involved, they will help. But if there is no money involved, they do not care. I saw the flooding happening in China and Germany, too. It is everywhere, it is climate change, but they do not care."

Kamal and his brother Bilal were both raised in Dearborn with their siblings. Everyone in their family, including their mother, was flooded in their respective homes.

"It's crazy because 2014 was brutal. But 2021 was way worse. Then two weeks later, it happened again. Similar damage was done both times, but in 2021 the water just went higher. If you count the appliances, the furnace, washing machine, dryer, refrigerator, drywall, two-by-fours, furniture—it's at least \$10,000. But that's a pretty low estimate."

Kamal explained how many Yemeni-American families such as his make use of the basements in their homes to visit with family members and others in the community. "A lot of people don't have finished

basements but we do, and my brother I know spent \$30–40,000 on his basement. It was very, very unfortunate and it is a bad situation, not just for us but for everyone. Lucky there are many of us who can help each other, but I feel bad for those who don't have someone who can help and support them.

"We need to have a better sewer system. [After 2014] the city of Dearborn invested a ton of money to help the sewer system and the hope was they would do a better job, but obviously that is not how it went. There are certain areas that never got flooded. West Dearborn has like 13 sewer openings; versus the East or the South where there are only two or three openings," he said, referring to the uneven infrastructure in the city.

"I think everyone needs to be treated the same across the board, and I think there's a lot that needs to change. There needs to be more grass than concrete, there needs to be in general a better foundation to help the systems execute right. The leaders need to step up—the mayor, city council members—the federal government needs to get involved and help community members. We should be getting all the help we can get. The fact that it happened twice in three weeks is scary. My wife no longer goes to the basement because she is so scared. I even got the kids asking me, 'Dad, did it flood?' It's a shame."

Kamal described how residents have been left to fend for themselves. "In 2014 I was accepted to get FEMA, but most recently I was declined because I have insurance. But my insurance company only covered up to \$5,000 in damages. That barely pays for the furnace itself, and when you are losing the washer and dryer, carpet on the stairs, your furniture—and then, all the kids' toys. Those are sentimental. You cannot take that back. The photos, pictures, all that. In 2014 I lost all that stuff. So, I do not want to say I have learned my lesson, but after 2014, I stopped fixing my basement. I am done. We were hoping that because the city said they were improving the sewage system that it would be okay. So my brother went ahead and fixed his basement after 2014. Whereas I just did not trust the system."

"While it was flooding, we were just filling up buckets with water and throwing it all outside for like three hours until we just gave up," Bilal, Kamal's brother, said. He explained that local big-chain hardware stores were engaging in price gouging: "We had to go price our kitchen cabinets. We originally bought the top and bottom cabinets for about \$6,000 but when we went to get pricing now, they said \$5,000 for just the bottom ones."

Bilal also explained how FEMA and the insurance companies pass the buck, leaving everyone to pay for their own restoration. "We didn't get no FEMA money for my mom's house. She applied and got rejected because she has insurance. The insurance company's name is Berkshire Hathaway. Then the insurance company denied my mom. The reason was they claimed that there was nothing wrong with the sewers, that Dearborn came out with a statement stating that it could only hold up to three inches but it rained seven inches, so they are claiming it as a flood and not a sewer backup. And I do believe they denied everyone through Berkshire Hathaway."

Kamal said, "This was not the first time. This was the second time. They [the city of Dearborn] got a lot of money last time and they never used it wisely. It's 2021. Technology is growing. If people are paying for things, why is it like this? It is funny, I was talking to one of the 'politicians' who's running for city council or mayor or something. They admitted it, it is a crime—when it boils down to it, it is a crime, really, what is happening."

"Everybody wants to say, 'It is global warming.' Okay well, we understand. Then, 'It is mother nature.' Okay, we understand. But there are certain things you can do to prevent this."

"We have family and friends whose businesses have been ruined. Then you go and apply for FEMA, and you get rejected because you have insurance, and your insurance gives you \$5,000. Well, guess what, \$5,000 does not even barely cover anything. And then they want receipts! Come

on—I do not have receipts for something that I purchased 10 years ago. And besides, how can you give them receipts for sentimental pictures? Or my friend's varsity jacket; those are memorable, priceless, I do not have a receipt for that.

"They have to do something. I told my family to just leave it, do not even fix it. If it happens again, they [the City of Dearborn] are not doing anything for us. We kind of gave up. My mom has dreams at night. She is thinking every time it rains, 'Check the basement!' It can cause some serious illness, health issues. It stinks. There's mold and pollution and all that nonsense we have been taking into our lungs."

"It looks bad here but where I was at before, the South End of Dearborn, I mean, man—it is even worse over there. You got more senior citizens over there and less money. That is why they do not do much over there. The West End is more taken care of on that side. It is known as the 'rich' area."

Ahmed lives in the South End of Dearborn, where many residents have protested against uneven investment in infrastructure due to residents' lower income. He has lived in the city for 40 years.

"This neighborhood, this area here, got hit real bad. You see the new houses across the street? You could look into their basement windows and it was like a swimming pool. You could see the water all the way up to here. You could hardly walk. I had to go around the side of the house and when I went into the basement I was very sorry. It was all the way up to here," he said, touching the top of his chest.

"Here in the South End of Dearborn it's so expensive. We have the highest taxes on our houses and look at where we at: this is the cemetery," he said, pointing across the street. "There's Ford," he said pointing to the Ford plant. "The train, blowing its horn all night long," he said pointing at the train station. "And the ships coming in from the river making noise all night," he said pointing at the Detroit River. "All this and it smells like a dead dog. I do not know how they treat people like this. I am thinking about selling my house, to be honest with you. It is a big mess. They did not pay attention to us. The streets were all stopped up. We did not get any of the services into which we pay as taxpayers."

He described how the sewage has been rotting out his basement. "If you go inside the house you can hardly stand up from the smell. I'm getting a company now to clean up the inside because I did everything I could myself but it makes no difference. The kitchen, the walls... it's a big mess."

He pointed again towards the river. "They have a sewer over here. They have gates that go to the river and if they open those gates then we would not have drowned. But they [the city of Dearborn] worry about Ford. You understand what I'm saying? They do not want Ford to drown, but for us, it is fine. I wish Ford would buy this neighborhood, just buy us out, because to be honest with you we are getting tired of it. Just pay us so we can leave. This is the second flood in the last few weeks. We wake up and the basement is all filled up."

"I just applied for FEMA last night and I do not know what they are going to say about it. I have insurance but they did not show up yet. I have good insurance, but it only covers up to \$10,000 and I know the cost of my basement will be at least \$27,000 with all the losses I have had and I am out of a job so I do not how I am going to keep up with this. My washing machine, dryer, water heater, the heater to the house... Until now we did not get one single penny, no help, we call the city and make emails, they have a page to find out more info—but we did not get any answers from day one until today."

"We have to lock up the door to the basement and put something under the door to keep the smell out. I did not break down the kitchen yet because I have been waiting for the insurance people and the FEMA people to show up. I did not want to do too much work yet without them seeing it. Because then they say, 'It did not happen.'"

"The garbage piled up all over for almost two weeks. No one touched it."

You could pass by the neighborhood and it smells like rot, and it still does now honestly. I am just trying to get some tools together now to start breaking apart the kitchen to try to get to where I think the smell is coming from. But I have a back problem, I am tired.

“This is the number one that we are worried about: the health of our families. I do not care about a basement, my family is first priority. But there is no other choice we have. Honestly if I had the money I would go somewhere else at least for a couple months until everything is cleaned up, or maybe pay someone to help break up the basement.”

Ahmed explained that his neighborhood is ignored by politicians and the media, and described the terrible living conditions being so close to an oil refinery and a major auto plant. “Nobody wants to look at us. Nobody ever pays attention to this neighborhood honestly.

“I cleaned my car the other day and I wake up and my car is covered in ashes from the factory chimneys. The train when it is passing, in the middle of the night, it blows its horn and you wake up five, six times through the night. And the same with the ship when it comes from the river to Ford, it blows its horn until everybody is up. I am getting tired of it.

“My memories and everything is in this neighborhood and we do not want to leave but we know it is not worth it, it is poisonous. We are getting tired of it and we wish we could leave. People get cancer in this neighborhood from the toxins. If I was still young and thinking right I would not live in this neighborhood. But at this time, at my age, what can we do?”



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