

Major winter storm causes turmoil throughout the US Capital Region

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5 January 2022

A major storm system swept across the United States' Capital Region early Monday, resulting in numerous deaths, power outages and turmoil for residents trapped by the inclement weather.

COVID-19 testing centers were closed, leaving thousands without access to basic health care as the Omicron variant surges in the nation's capital and surrounding states. According to the *Washington Post*, Washington D.C. and Virginia had COVID-19 test positivity rates at 19 percent in the last week of December, with Maryland only slightly lower at 14 percent.

Travel throughout the region ground to a halt as icy roads led to "scores of vehicle crashes across the region," according to the *Post*. A collision between a passenger vehicle and a snowplow in Montgomery County, Maryland led to the deaths of three passengers and left another in critical condition.

A 50-mile stretch of I-95 between Exit 104 in Ruther Glen and Exit 152 in Dumfries, Virginia was closed Monday, resulting in thousands of vehicles stranded in dangerous freezing weather, some for over 24 hours after Virginia State Police reported hundreds of accidents caused by vehicles "going too fast for conditions" on roads.

InsideNOVA reported passengers stranded without access to food, water or medication as exits closed and traffic ground to a standstill. "Can someone please send help? I'm starting to feel very weak," tweeted one diabetic commuter to Virginia's Democratic governor Ralph Northam after spending 18 hours stuck without insulin. Others evinced shock and anger that the state National Guard had not yet been activated to deal with the emergency situation. By 4:00 p.m. on Tuesday, the highway remained closed with thousands still stranded.

Northam defended his administration's contemptuous

response, calling the event a "perfect storm" that could not have been predicted, although it had been predicted days in advance.

Marcie Parker of Virginia's Department of Transportation also sought to deflect blame for the state's inaction, declaring Tuesday that "anticipated snowfall rates were faster than anticipated [sic]," while ludicrously suggesting that pre-salting the highway would not have been effective because the snow was mixed with rain.

The sudden snowfall follows one of the warmest December months in the Washington D.C. metropolitan region, with temperatures reaching 60 degrees in parts of the area just a day before the storm.

"We can expect more frequent and severe extreme weather events associated with climate change, in the form of winter storms, floods, wildfires, etc," stated Mark Abkowitz, a professor of civil and environmental engineering at Vanderbilt University to *The Hill*. Abkowitz called for "transportation agencies... to expand their thinking into how to be resilient to these types of future scenarios."

Compounding the difficulties, numerous jurisdictions reported significant staffing shortages caused by first responders catching COVID-19. The *Post* called the lack of systematic road clearing situation in Arlington, Virginia "almost absurdist." Arlington County officials in Northern Virginia reported that efforts to clear roads of snow and ice were "currently impacted by COVID19-related staffing shortages."

The largest snowfall occurred in southern New Jersey and Delaware, with Atlantic County, New Jersey seeing nearly 14 inches of snow at Atlantic City International Airport. The Washington D.C. region and its environs received between five and 10 inches.

The snow resulted in thousands of flight

cancellations throughout the region. This was compounded by many thousands of flights being grounded due to staff shortages caused by the Omicron variant of the coronavirus. According to FlightAware, nearly 3,000 domestic and 4,800 international flights were canceled on the east coast Monday.

In addition to travel delays, broad swathes of the population lost power throughout the region. According to the *Post*, “widespread outages” were reported as far south as Georgia, with Virginia and Maryland seeing the brunt of the impact.

Over 220,000 were left without power as Dominion Energy warned customers of “the possibility of being without power for multiple days.” Nearly 37,000 homes went without power in Maryland on Monday. The heavily-wooded region frequently has suffered outages as poorly-managed vegetation falls on power lines.



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