

Death toll continues to mount as extreme winter weather inundates Buffalo and freezes much of United States

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Freezing temperatures and massive snowfall are blamed for at least 57 deaths across the US as of Monday evening, with many more expected as temperatures remain below freezing and people are trapped in their cars.

Since Friday, more than 200 million people have been affected by a massive winter storm stretching from Maine in the Northeast down to the Gulf of Mexico and as far west as the Rocky Mountains. Over 1.7 million people have lost power.

Buffalo, New York, where at least 27 people have died, has seen some of the worst winter weather recorded. As of Monday, the Buffalo airport reported over 40 inches (101.6 cm) of snow with another 9 inches (22.86 cm) to a foot (30.48 cm) being predicted before snow is expected to stop on Tuesday.

Hurricane strength winds knocked out power for many, created whiteout conditions and prevented emergency crews from reaching those in need.

Many of those who died were trapped in their cars or homes without power. One person was found dead in a snow drift, and several people died while shoveling snow. At least two people died when they had a medical emergency, but first responders were not able to get through.

William Clay was found lying face down in the snow on Christmas Eve. Relatives said it was his 56th birthday and that he may have been seeking to buy something from a nearby convenience store.

People placed desperate calls on social media for assistance, asking for food and, in one case, diapers.

Facebook comments from a western New Yorker desperate for help exemplify the disorganized response of the capitalist system to extreme yet predictable storms: “Anyone have an update on the Parkside area and when they should get power back? My family including my 94 year old grandma live in the smaller neighborhood next to Medaille college and have been without heat/power since Friday am. National Grid maps are totally incorrect and there hasn’t been a crew out. No plowing has been done so no one can get in or out. They’ve tried the 858-snow number which has been useless so far.”

Another pleaded for help as fuel ran out to light candles and phones were dying: “Anybody near Rhode Island st that can

help my family out ? We’ve had no power/ no heat for over 24hrs now. We are also very limited on the food that we can make. All of our phones are dying/almost dead and we won’t have anything in case of a emergency. and we barley have any butane left for our Stick lighter to light candles! if you can help out please pm me ?? thank you. — feeling cold.”

At 10 a.m. Monday morning, one person wrote: “120 Minnesota Ave is now going on 72 hours without power or heat. there has been a report of one resident deceased. I was able to escape with my family, but there is no way the other residents are able to leave and walk through the snow. Many are elderly and physically unable to walk. We need snowmobiles sent to 120 Minnesota asap. One neighbor is trapped on the 3rd floor and cannot walk down the stairs without assistance we have been communicating with him via text and he is now not making sense and says he thinks he’s going to die. I will pay for someone with a snowmobile to please help them!”

Later on, they were able to report that they had been evacuated.

This is the second major snow fall to inundate Western New York this season. A massive storm in November dumped a record of over 5 feet (1.52 meters) of snow on the region.

While bringing slightly less snow, this latest storm is having a bigger impact because of the extremely high winds and the much broader scope of the storm.

Officials say that on any given night, 2,500 to 4,000 people in Buffalo are homeless, living with others, in shelters or out on the streets. They are the most exposed to the deadly effects of winter weather and are at most risk to be injured or killed.

Maruce, who works at the Faith Based Fellowship, a homeless shelter near downtown Buffalo, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that they are completely full and are being forced to refer those seeking shelter to a social services hotline. “We are all snowed in, everyone is in the house. Nice and warm. We have been getting a lot of calls the last couple of days, we are full. I direct them to 211 and they will get them placed somewhere.

“It is hard, they are calling and knowing they are in need and

we are just unable to help. There is help out there and everything I can do I will do.”

Lack of affordable housing and homelessness is a big problem in Buffalo as it is in the rest of the country.

Maruce pointed out that the city owns a lot of abandoned properties that they could renovate as housing for the homeless. “There are even some abandoned housing projects, these could be fixed for the homeless. They have been abandoned for years.”

Across the country, Maruce pointed out that not enough is being done for the homeless. Pointing to a recent decision by the state of California, “Banning homeless camps is not a solution. Where do you want them to go? You are just trying to ship them to somewhere else.”

Thomas Green, the shelter’s director, explained that housing has become unaffordable for many people who cannot afford the rent for apartments and that the COVID-19 pandemic has made the homeless problem a lot worse.

“We have seen homelessness increase. A lot of people lost jobs, lots of small businesses having to close, the smaller places couldn’t remain open. Plus people got sick, went to hospitals and they lost their jobs and weren’t able to maintain their situation.

“When the moratorium on evictions was ended, a lot of people had to leave their homes.”

Green explained that even when the moratorium was in effect, “many people lost their homes if they had to go into the hospital for a long time or weren’t able to get the mental health assistance that they needed.”

On Saturday, nearly every fire truck in Buffalo was stranded in the snow. Overworked health care and emergency workers, already depleted from three years of the pandemic, are again being asked to sacrifice to address this crisis. One Buffalo health care worker posted on social media that they have been working for 48 hours straight and pleaded for anyone who was able to get to the hospital to relieve them.

The current cold weather and storm are caused by a massive movement of cold air from the Arctic region across Canada and down south as far as Texas.

The intensity and severity of the storm is another product of global warming. Scientists explain that the warming atmosphere can carry more water vapor, which in turn acts as fuel for the storms and brings more snow and ice.

Warming in the Arctic weakens the jet stream that travels west to east which typically acts as a barrier to the colder Arctic air moving south.

Such storms will increase in both frequency and intensity as the world continues to warm.

Throughout the country, the storm has brought deadly conditions. From Friday through Sunday, much of the country suffered freezing conditions, with single-digit and subzero weather reaching as far south as parts of Louisiana, Alabama and Texas.

A mother in Georgia tweeted that temperatures had fallen to 17 degrees Fahrenheit (-8.3 degrees Celsius) Monday night, and they have been without power. She has a 14-year-old son who is on a ventilator, and they were going to have to transport him to a hospital.

The speed at which temperatures dropped was especially hard for the homeless.

In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, temperatures dropped from 28 degrees F. (-2.2 degrees C.) Friday morning at 5:30 to -2 degrees F. (-18.9 degrees C.) just four hours later, with wind chills of minus 26 degrees (-32 degrees C.).

Terry, a homeless man who can often be seen panhandling in downtown Pittsburgh, explained that he is dropped off in downtown at 7:00 a.m. to beg for money and is not picked up until 7:00 p.m.

“It started getting real cold real fast. We had no place to go, you would get a few dollars and maybe go into a 7-11 [convenience store] for coffee, but they don’t want you standing around.”

Pittsburgh Mayor Ed Gainey, who promised to address the city’s lack of affordable housing and homeless problems, recently opened a 122-bed shelter, but this has already filled up. At the same time he has also cleared out homeless encampments from under overpasses and bridges to make the problem less visible.

Water has become a major problem for many people in the South, where freezing temperatures cause unprotected pipes to burst.

Residents in Jackson, Mississippi, must now boil their drinking water as water lines burst in the freezing temperatures. Earlier this year, residents did not have safe drinking water for weeks because of the decay of their water system.

The Associated Press (AP) is reporting that some residents of Shreveport, Louisiana, were without water on Monday, and that in Selma, Alabama, the mayor has declared a state of emergency because the city is worried it will run out of water.

Workers at a South Carolina food bank are trying to save over \$1 million in food as water pipes froze and broke over the weekend. And the AP reports that emergency dispatchers around Atlanta are being overwhelmed with people calling about broken pipes.



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