

“On any given night ...”

Mayor’s report understates homeless crisis in Detroit

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In response to public anger over the freezing deaths on February 10 of two-year-old A’millah Currie and nine-year-old Darnell Currie Jr., the Democratic mayor of Detroit, Mike Duggan, commissioned Deputy Mayor Melia Howard to review the city’s emergency shelters and the attempts of the mother, Tateona Williams, to find relief through the Detroit and Wayne County homeless aid systems.

The report, released February 26, touts marginal improvements in funding, staffing and emergency short-term bed space, and encourages the homeless to seek shelter in Detroit Police Department precincts because of the “high degree of trust the community is showing in DPD.”

The two young children froze to death as they slept with members of their homeless family inside a van parked at a downtown Detroit casino garage. Tateona Williams, an unemployed medical assistant, had been living in the van with her five children and her own mother for three months.

The mayor’s report, noting that the Williams/Currie family was unaware of an emergency shelter down the street from the casino parking garage, recommends the hiring of an additional Night Outreach Team to sweep parking garages and check for people sleeping in cars. The city absolves itself of any responsibility for the horrific deaths and the homeless crisis in general by claiming that it made the proper follow-up calls after referring the family to an overflow emergency shelter.

The working class must reject such half-measures and lies and demand a full accounting of the scale and depth of the homeless crisis in the city of Detroit and across the country.

The *World Socialist Web Site* warned in its 2025 New Year Statement, “Socialism against oligarchy, fascism and war,” that the election of Donald Trump represented a violent realignment of the political superstructure to correspond with the social reality of oligarchy and mass immiseration. Conditions of neglect and social murder prevail among the most vulnerable sections of the working class, a consequence of the extreme concentration of wealth in the hands of an oligarchic ruling elite, itself a cancerous expression of a crisis of the entire capitalist social order.

The decline in living standards, especially since the end of COVID relief funding and a moratorium on evictions and foreclosures, has been much greater than political and media leaders dare acknowledge. There are many more workers experiencing homelessness than the numbers show.

Misleading report on Williams/Currie case

The measures proposed in the city’s report are ludicrously inadequate given the real scale of the problem. A proposed increase in emergency shelter space does not address the large increase in the homeless population in need of more permanent housing. According to Tasha Gray, executive director of Homeless Action Network Detroit:

The city, in particular, has really made changes to add more family beds to the system, but I think we’re experiencing family homelessness at a level far greater than the beds that are being added to the system.

Data from the city’s Coordinated Assessment Model, or CAM, indicates that families spent an average of 133 days on a shelter placement waitlist, indicating a vast undersupply of shelter space, which the city’s plan does nothing to address.

The city’s report does not even evince an understanding of basic issues related to counting the homeless population. It states, “According to the most recent data from January 2024, *on any given night* 1,725 people are estimated to be experiencing literal homelessness in Detroit” (emphasis added).

This is both false and misleading. The number 1,725 is taken from the yearly Point-in-Time (PIT) count, conducted in accordance with the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and represents a count of the homeless population on a particular night in late January, definitely not “on any given night.”

The PIT count is widely understood by homeless advocacy professionals to be an undercount of the homeless population, relying on data from a single night in the dead of winter, and only measuring people in shelter or transitional housing, or who are captured in street counts. Families with children are particularly difficult to count with this method, as many avoid interaction with authorities for fear of losing child custody.

Using data from the 2022-23 school year, of the 1.4 million children identified as homeless nationally, itself a significant undercount, only 16 percent fall into the category measured by PIT counts—those who are unsheltered or staying in shelters. The rest stay in short-term arrangements like hotels or double-up with another family—unstable

situations that are often unsafe and leave families just as vulnerable as they would be in shelters or on the streets.

PIT counts are carried out by selfless and dedicated workers in the dead of winter, but they inevitably underestimate the homeless population. A 2001 study used data from homeless service providers to give estimates of an average daily homeless rate 2.5 to 10 times higher than the PIT count, and a 2022 study in Seattle gave a number four times higher.

The US Department of Education gathers data according to a broader definition of homelessness that includes those living in hotels or temporarily doubled-up. This data, while still an enormous undercount, provides a somewhat clearer picture of the problem.

According to PIT data, on a single night in 2023, 653,104 people nationwide and 8,997 adults and children in Michigan experienced homelessness. For the 2022-23 school year, the US Department of Education counts 1.37 million homeless students nationwide, from pre-kindergarten through the 12th grade, and 32,762 in Michigan, with 2,579 in the Detroit Public Schools Community District alone. These numbers cannot be compared directly because of a difference in methodology, including the fact that the school numbers are annualized, but the comparison shows the effect of a more realistic definition of homelessness. Nationwide, homeless students alone outnumber the PIT count two to one.

Even these numbers are far too low. A 2021 University of Michigan Poverty Solutions report on district and charter schools in Detroit found that the real student homeless population was likely four to eight times the US Department of Education numbers. The 2024 Michigan homeless student count was 35,495. By this standard, the real number could be from 140,000 to 280,000 students in Michigan experiencing homelessness in the 2023-24 school year.

Official homelessness, as measured by PIT data, doubled during the presidency of Joe Biden, in large part because of the ending of COVID subsidies and the moratorium on evictions and foreclosures in early 2022.

The City of Detroit report notes that Tateona Williams first contacted the city seeking help from a program the Biden administration allowed to expire:

The first record of a call was in December 2022 seeking assistance in rent payments from the COVID Emergency Rental Assistance (CERA). CERA was a federally funded program that had expired earlier that year.

Leah McCall, executive director of the Oakland County Alliance for Housing, told the WSWs that with the loss of this funding:

We have had to scale back our support and refocus our priorities on a smaller subset of those experiencing homelessness. Unfortunately, our waitlists remain in the hundreds, illustrating the overwhelming demand for housing assistance. While the pandemic-era funding provided a temporary but much-needed safety net, the need for sustained, long-term investment in housing programs remains critical to preventing further displacement and ensuring stability for vulnerable populations.

Workers must be aware of the scale of the homeless crisis to understand the scale of the solution required. Workers should demand nothing less than universal decent and affordable housing and the ending of evictions and foreclosures.

This, in turn, requires that housing, along with all other social needs, be taken out of the hands of the parasitic bankers, hedge fund operators and speculators who presently monopolize the system. They must be expropriated and the corporations and banks turned into public utilities, controlled democratically by the working class. The wealth produced by the labor of the working class must be used in a planned and democratic manner to provide jobs at decent wages, quality education and universal and free health care for all.

No support should be given to the parties and politicians of the ruling class, who deliberately conceal the scale of the homeless crisis in order to facilitate the social plunder carried out by the billionaire oligarchs who control them.

No section of the working class, least of all the homeless, can rely on the Democratic Party to defend their interests. The massive rise in unacknowledged homelessness, and the indifference of party leaders, played a part in the rejection of the Democratic Party by large sections of the working class in the 2024 election. Now the billionaire fascist Trump and his centibillionaire buddy Elon Musk, who calls homeless people subhuman “zombies,” are firing hundreds of thousands of federal workers, shutting down entire federal departments, and gutting Medicaid, food stamps, housing assistance and other social programs, while the Democrats do nothing to oppose them.

At the same time, workers must defend the rights of immigrants. Khaz25 put it well in a recent comment: “What every working person mustn’t forget is that homeless people are forced migrants within a country, while immigrants are homeless poor across international borders.” Children are freezing to death in Detroit as well as in Gaza.

The City of Detroit, well aware of public anger, made sure Tateona Williams’ family was provided with a home and rent for a year. What the city provided to Tateona Williams’ family could be extended to all who need it through the public appropriation and rational use of vacant property. This basic demand for decent housing can be achieved only by a united working class, armed with the knowledge and experience of decades of struggle to overthrow the oligarchy and establish a workers government.



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