

Water main break in Waterbury, Connecticut, exposes decrepit state of New England infrastructure

David Harrison
17 December 2025

Late Friday night, December 12, a 42-inch high-pressure transmission water main burst with explosive force under a street in Waterbury, Connecticut. Pavement was thrown into the air and windows were shattered. Located about 30 miles southwest of Hartford, the city has a population of 114,000, making it the state's fifth largest municipality. The break affected schools, businesses, and healthcare facilities, leading to closures and disruptions for several days.

Waterbury—once the heart of the “Brass Valley” from the early 1800s through the early 20th century, with the operation of companies like Scovill Manufacturing, American Brass and Chase Brass & Copper—by the 1970s and 1980s was experiencing economic decline with the shuttering of factories and was ranked as having the worst quality of life of 300 US metropolitan areas by *Money Magazine* by 1992. The catastrophic failure of the city's water system is emblematic of this economic decline.

By Saturday, December 13, the widespread water outage had affected approximately 100,000 people in Waterbury and two suburbs, Wolcott and Watertown. This was one of the city's most significant water emergencies in decades.

The city's fire hydrants were rendered unusable, and a boil water advisory was issued for areas with limited pressure. Waterbury restaurants were ordered closed. By midday Saturday, Governor Ned Lamont and Waterbury Mayor Paul K. Pernerewski Jr. held a briefing, confirming a massive, coordinated response effort that included the deployment of the National Guard.

Water Superintendent Brad Malay noted that the fragility and age of these pipes meant “it doesn't take a lot for those pipes to ... let go.” Water loss continued for over 12 hours after the rupture because the older isolation valves were too fragile to be closed, preventing the break

from being localized. Pernerewski explained that the inability to shut these valves meant the affected area had to “spread to bigger and bigger areas.” Malay noted the reluctance to even touch the ancient valves, stating that the risk of breaking them by “exercising” them was considered greater than the reward, leaving them alone for decades until a crisis forced the issue.

The multi-day crisis was rooted in long-standing infrastructure problems, beginning with an earlier failure of a 10-inch water line, originally installed in 1901, which undermined the adjacent 42-inch transmission main. This prior failure was the underlying cause that destabilized the larger, 55-year-old high-pressure pipe. Adding to the risk, the city's second high-pressure main was already offline during the critical week of December 13, as it was undergoing reinforcement with a thick plastic liner, eliminating the system's backup capability.

This situation escalated dramatically early Sunday morning, around 3:30 a.m., when an overnight fire broke out at a local business. Due to the unusable fire hydrants, fire crews were compelled to rely on tanker trucks and mutual aid from neighboring towns, an effort severely complicated by a snowstorm that began late Saturday night.

On Sunday, December 14, the National Guard assisted with bottled water distribution, ultimately distributing over 5,000 gallons. Officials reported partial restoration, with water returned to Watertown and areas including much of downtown and other Waterbury neighborhoods. But damage to the transmission main was assessed as more extensive than initially believed.

Both Waterbury Public Schools and Wolcott Public Schools were closed beginning Monday, December 15, through Wednesday. Officials planned to pressure-test and chlorinate the backup high-pressure main the

following week, with full service restoration anticipated within 24 to 48 hours of the initial crisis briefings.

The crisis carried deep social implications spanning public health, equitable distribution, and public trust for the entire community. The public health response was immediate, requiring a boil water advisory due to the risk of harmful microorganisms contaminating the system. Residents were explicitly instructed to use boiled or bottled water for drinking, cooking, washing food and brushing teeth.

Officials specifically stressed that infants, the elderly and other vulnerable populations should use boiled or bottled water even for bathing. The loss of pressure also led to immediate hygiene and sanitation concerns, as many residents could not flush toilets and were left confused over how to manage biohazards safely in their homes. The boil water advisory is still in effect until water service is completely restored and the Connecticut Department of Public Health approves water quality test results.

The water main break crisis in Waterbury severely impacted operations at its two hospitals, St. Mary's and Waterbury Hospital, forcing emergency measures to ensure continued service. *CT Insider*, citing Mayor Pernerewski, reported that "both hospitals in Waterbury are not performing surgery, and emergencies are not being accepted at St. Mary's Hospital." Water trucks and tankers were brought in to supply potable water so essential services could continue.

The sudden need for potable water caused significant availability issues. Panic buying led to stores being quickly emptied of water. Crucially, physically disabled residents and those without vehicles struggled to obtain bottled water, as municipal services, including 311 non-emergency municipal services, confirmed they were not offering delivery. Diabetic residents face the critical health risk of being unable to wash their hands properly for accurate blood sugar testing.

Residents were asked to conserve water for an extended period even after pressure returned to help the system fully recharge.

The water main break highlighted the critical need for infrastructure investment in the city. Waterbury has a pipeline replacement program but faces a massive backlog due to the scale and cost of the work. Citizens pointed out that many of Waterbury's mains were installed over a century ago, roughly between 1890 and 1920. The ongoing emergency repairs, estimated at \$3–4 million per year, were criticized as costing more than a proactive

replacement plan.

Waterbury is not unique, much of New England's wastewater infrastructure dates from the late 19th to mid-20th century. In addition to Waterbury, many New England cities, including Boston, Providence, Hartford and Springfield, still rely on cast-iron or ductile-iron pipes that range from 80 to over 150 years old. They are made from cast iron that corrodes, becomes brittle and fails suddenly. Break rates increase sharply after about 75 years of age, resulting in boil-water advisories, health issues and emergency repairs, especially during cold snaps or heat waves.

The situation in Waterbury is only the latest in a series of crises affecting water systems across the country. The most notorious recent example is the ongoing crisis in Flint, Michigan (2014–present), in which a state-ordered switch to Flint River water without adequate corrosion control led to massive lead poisoning, an outbreak of Legionnaires' disease, and continued economic and health costs for residents.

In recent decades, investigations and reporting have identified elevated lead or industrial chemical contamination across the United States, including in Cleveland and Sebring, Ohio; Jackson, Mississippi; Newark, New Jersey; Baltimore, Maryland; Los Angeles and many other cities. These are not isolated incidents but part of a national pattern of decaying infrastructure and regulatory failure.

Lead service lines remained common for decades due to industry lobbying. A federal ban came only in 1986, and millions of miles of legacy lead pipe remain, creating an ongoing public health hazard.

Despite water being essential to human life, New England's water systems fell into disrepair because the political system under capitalism rewards delay until failure. Only under a planned socialist economy can resources be properly allocated to prevent events like what happened in Waterbury, and the threats posed by similar crises across the US.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact