

Homeless Kalamazoo, Michigan man freezes to death while city spends \$515 million on arena

Riley Ward
6 February 2026

At around 5:30 a.m., December 10, 2025, 29-year-old Christopher Nurrie, Jr. was found unresponsive, without shoes or a shirt, in below freezing temperatures in Martin Luther King, Jr. Park in downtown Kalamazoo, Michigan. According to the Kalamazoo Department of Public Safety (KDPS), he was transported to a hospital where he was later pronounced dead.

MLive reported that Nurrie, Jr. was a father of four children and had lived in Kalamazoo with his grandfather for about four years after leaving Memphis, Tennessee. When his grandfather died, Nurrie, Jr. became homeless. He had been in the hospital for five days after surgery for a neck infection and was discharged on the afternoon of December 9. He did not have a phone.

Just one year ago, 54-year-old Tammy Christie froze to death in her car in downtown Kalamazoo, but no steps were taken to prevent the repetition of such a tragedy.

Nurrie, Jr.'s death is the predictable result of a society that is organized on the basis of the profit motive and private accumulation, rather than meeting human needs. New projects are on the horizon in Kalamazoo, a city of 73,000 in western Michigan, costing more than \$700 million.

Similar dynamics are playing out in cities across the nation and around the world. According to Oxfam, the 12 richest billionaires now own more than the poorest half of humanity, or 4 billion people. The \$2.5 trillion added to billionaire fortunes last year could eradicate extreme poverty worldwide 26 times over.

Looking south from Martin Luther King, Jr. Park, where Nurrie, Jr. froze to death, there is visible a \$44 million hotel development opened in 2021, a \$94 million 8th District Courthouse opened in 2023, cranes building a \$515 million arena and parking garage, and heavy machinery preparing a site for a planned \$100 million county administration building and parking garage.

The most significant development is the arena being built by Catalyst Development Co. This comes after efforts in 2011 and 2018 to build an arena with public funds provided by new sales taxes failed to garner enough public support to even put the measures on the ballot.

The arena, named the Kalamazoo Event Center, will be the new home of the University of Western Michigan basketball and hockey teams and the K-Wings, a minor league hockey team owned by two of the wealthiest individuals in Kalamazoo, married couple Bill Johnston and Ronda Stryker.

Bill Johnston is the chairman and co-founder of Greenleaf Trust, which manages some \$20 billion in assets and owns Catalyst Development Co. Ronda Stryker is on the board of directors of the medical device company Stryker Corporation. *Forbes* estimates her 2025 net worth at \$8.6 billion.

The \$515 million arena is reportedly being paid for without any public funds, likely in an attempt to blunt criticism. But it would not be possible

without government support. Thirteen million dollars in infrastructure improvements is being split with the City of Kalamazoo. The downtown land on which it is being built was assembled by the county and sold to Catalyst Development Co. for \$4.27 million in June of 2023.

The city and county governments have been tasked with sanitizing and enhancing the downtown to secure profitability for this major investment, as well as for the numerous speculative land purchases that have followed.

Homelessness has been a significant issue in Kalamazoo for decades, and the presence of homeless and poor individuals occupying public spaces and panhandling dissuades wealthy and upper-middle class individuals from shopping, attending events, staying overnight, or renting downtown.

County declares housing a public health crisis

On December 2, eight days prior to the death of Nurrie, Jr., the majority Democratic Kalamazoo County Board of Commissioners (KCBC) passed a resolution 8 to 1 “declaring housing a public health crisis in Kalamazoo County.” The declaration’s stated purpose is to enable “cross-sector coordination and... expand access to state and federal resources to address root causes.”

Despite declaring a crisis, no urgent action was taken that could have prevented the death of Nurrie, Jr. and no additional action was proposed following his death.

The declaration vaguely “directs the Housing Department and Health & Community Services Department to work collaboratively to integrate County housing strategies to improve both housing and health outcomes,” collect and report metrics, and encourage “continued alignment and partnership among the Kalamazoo County Land Bank, Continuum of Care, nonprofit organizations, local municipalities, and the philanthropic and private sectors to ensure coordinated progress toward the shared goal of healthy, affordable housing for all residents.”

Though the resolution included limited data to justify the declaration, none of it was related to homelessness. This is despite the fact that the board witnessed a presentation at its October 7, 2025 meeting from the Kalamazoo County Continuum of Care on the 2025 Point-in-Time (PIT) Count. This count identified 791 homeless individuals, which was a 19 percent increase from 2024 and the highest number since 2011.

That the real impetus for this action is the arena development was exposed at the November 18, 2025 meeting of the KCBC when the resolution was introduced. It was brought forward by Democratic Commissioner Monteze Morales, who stated “this has been two years in

the making,” which lines up with the beginning of the arena development.

It is also worth noting that there was no presentation or public comment provided by the department of Health and Community Services, even though the interim health officer was present in the audience at both the November 18 and December 2 meetings. This indicates that the resolution is based on political calculations, rather than genuine public health concerns.

The declaration of the crisis was likely withheld until the release of the Draft Housing Framework, which was presented at the November 18 meeting of the KCBC. This plan, lauded as transformational by board members, purports to stabilize housing affordability and coordinate housing development through various initiatives.

Notably, none of the initiatives involve raising new taxes, even though Kalamazoo currently does not have any local income tax. Instead, they rely on leveraging existing local, state, and federal government funds and philanthropy to attract and subsidize private investment.

At the December 16 meeting of the KCBC, an anonymous \$23.3 million “philanthropic investment” was accepted to support three years of the plan. That this “investment” has been accepted before the Draft Housing Framework has even had a public hearing, let alone been approved, illustrates how the wealthy control the county, not the residents.

Part of the donation is allocated to closing the funding gap for construction and operation of “The Landing Place.” This is an 80-unit family emergency shelter converted from a hotel the county bought in March 2025. The shelter is located near the airport along the border of neighboring Portage and is part of the plan to systematically move the homeless population out of downtown.

Public anger directed at the City Commission

Kalamazoo City Commission meetings held December 15 and January 5 saw, combined, over two hours of public comment, almost entirely focused on the issue of homelessness and anger over the death of Nurrie, Jr.

Attempting to shield themselves from criticism, prior to public comment at the December 15 meeting Kalamazoo Department of Public Safety (KDPS) officers gave a presentation regarding their outreach and engagement with the homeless, portraying themselves as proactive and empathetic.

The public comments destroyed this narrative, stating for the record that city policy criminalizes homelessness by prohibiting camping in public spaces, and that the city endangers the homeless by setting up the nearest warming shelter in adjacent Portage, seven miles from downtown, where the homeless generally congregate and the largest overnight shelters are located. Commenters said they volunteered their own time coordinating transportation for homeless individuals to the warming shelter, with no assistance from the Kalamazoo police.

At the end of the December 15 meeting of the Kalamazoo City Commission, the mayor of Kalamazoo, David Anderson, a Democrat, delivered a 22-minute lecture on how he has spent decades of his life in professional and personal service on the issue of housing and homelessness. He declared he knew what it actually took to get affordable units built—mainly patience, persistence, and cooperation. But the fact that the housing situation has reached the point that the Kalamazoo County Board of Commissioners felt compelled to officially declare a crisis demonstrates the bankruptcy of the approaches championed by Anderson.

Pushing the homeless out of downtown

The city is working to push the homeless out of downtown. In December of 2025, it fenced off the Arcadia Creek Festival Place for a two-year \$3.6 million renovation. This park is three blocks away from the new arena. It is across the street from the largest homeless shelter in the region, the Kalamazoo Gospel Mission.

The park had been one of the primary daytime gathering areas for the homeless until it was closed. Construction will likely not begin until spring or summer.

Across the street from the south side of the park is the \$90 million Warner Building, which opened in 2021 and is owned by Catalyst Development Co. One of the tenants of this building is the Stryker-Johnston Foundation.

A significant revenue source for the city of Kalamazoo is the Foundation for Excellence, which contributed \$25 million in 2025. FFE was created in 2017 by Bill Johnston and William Parfet with a \$70 million donation to stabilize the property tax rate and fund projects. Parfet is a billionaire former executive and board member of Upjohn Company (now Pfizer). An anonymous \$400 million donation to FFE in 2021 guarantees significant influence over the city for years to come.

For many, it may feel like the most direct path to helping the homeless is to appeal to the conscience of local politicians to use the resources and power of local government to meet human needs. However, the current experience in Kalamazoo makes clear the futility of this perspective.

Government, at all levels, is not a neutral referee. It is a tool in the hands of the ruling class to enforce capitalist social relations. Because of this, the local government cannot take any action that would significantly infringe on private profit.

As of this writing, apartments.com listed over 2,000 rentals available in Kalamazoo County. The 2023 American Communities Survey (ACS) from the Census Bureau estimated there were 8,212 vacant housing units in the county. However, vacant housing units and commercial buildings will stay empty until they secure a contract that satisfies the rate of profit demanded by capital.

For socialists, the right to decent housing is connected to other basic social rights—the right to education, the right to healthcare, the right to a job and decent wages and working conditions. None of these rights can be won without ending the profit system as a whole and replacing it with socialism. This requires a break with both parties of the corporate oligarchy—the Republicans and the Democrats—and the building of a mass movement of the working class to expropriate the oligarchs and replace the system based on private ownership of the means of production and profit with a socialist system based on public ownership and the satisfaction of human need.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact