

After freezing death of 93-year-old, Michigan city suspends electricity shutoffs

By Tom Eley
30 January 2009

Amidst widening public outrage over the freezing death of 93-year-old Marvin Schur, which took place some time between January 13 and 17, municipal authorities in Bay City, Michigan have announced plans to temporarily suspend electricity shutoffs and the use of “limiters,” devices that restrict and potentially block energy to households delinquent on electricity bills.

Schur died after the city put a limiter on his house as punishment for accruing just under \$1,100 in outstanding bills to the municipally owned electric company. At some point the limiter cut power to the entire house, which interrupted the operation of the man’s gas furnace. The city did not explain to Schur how to reactivate the limiter, and the elderly man, who may have suffered from dementia, was found dead several days later inside his freezing home.

The moratorium on the use of limiters will affect 60 to 70 households in Bay City that currently have the punitive device installed on their homes, according to city’s electric department director, Phil Newston. Newston also said that the city delivers suspension notices to about 50 households per week. The action was only taken after the needless and horrible death of the retired worker.

Politicians have finally made statements on the tragedy after mounting public anger. The Democratic politicians who represent Bay City, Rep. Jeff Mayes and Sen. Jim Barcia, have called for a moratorium on electricity service suspensions and limiters. But neither US Congressman for Bay City, Dale Kildee, nor Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm has offered a statement, according to their web sites and news searches.

For now, the city is not contemplating any significant

changes and has made it clear the moratorium will only be temporary. City Commission President Christopher J. Shannon, 1st Ward, told the *Bay City Times*, “The solution going forward is we’re going to have to identify the elderly and the infirmed as best we can when issuing a shutoff notice.” The politicians find inconceivable any solution that challenges the profit imperatives and monopolies of the big energy suppliers.

It is now clear that city officials in Bay City had hoped to cover up Schur’s death. An initial obituary, published on Sunday, January 25, approximately 10 days after Schur’s death, referred to the man dying “unexpectedly ...at his residence.” Angry neighbors called the *Bay City Times*, which confirmed the manner in which Schur died with Dr. Kanu Virani, the coroner who performed the autopsy on Schur’s body on January 19. Then on January 26 the *Bay City Times* ran an article revealing the use of the limiter and its connection to Schur’s death, which was quickly picked up by national and international news media.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Dr. Virani, who is the deputy chief medical examiner for Oakland County in suburban Detroit. When asked why city officials failed to disclose that Schur froze to death, Virani said, “That is their own policy, I cannot comment on it.” But he confirmed that the story only came to public attention after the *Bay City Times* interviewed him days after the incident.

The behavior of the city officials in the Schur case begs the question: How many similar deaths in the US are treated in this fashion?

It is believed that Schur had enough money to pay his electricity bill. Tragically, neighbors report that money for the bill was found on a table not far from the man’s frozen body. Schur’s 67-year-old nephew, William

Walworth of Florida, told the Associated Press, “It’s definitely not a situation where money is an issue. The issue has to do with the mental faculties you have and your ability to make good decisions.”

The question of whether or not Schur had the money to pay his bill is a secondary matter. Whether a household is able to pay—and perhaps Schur was physically or mentally unable to do so—should not affect delivery of heat, electricity and water, which are among the most rudimentary necessities of modern life.

Schur’s freezing death is also an indictment of how US society treats its elderly. Since January 17, four people over the age of 80 have been found frozen in Michigan. Doubtless there are many other such incidents across the country that never come to light. Many of these elderly people fall down near their homes, their bodies only discovered hours, or even days later.

The government is able to find trillions of dollars to bail out the largest banks and to conduct imperialist wars around the globe, but it will not provide the resources necessary to afford elderly workers safe and secure retirements. Care for the elderly in the US is viewed as “individual responsibility.” This attitude was summed up by the city manager of Bay City, Robert Belleman, who offered this advice after the manner in which Schur died finally escaped the city’s efforts to treat it as a normal passing: “I’ve said this before and some of my colleagues have said this: Neighbors need to keep an eye on neighbors.”

In recent days, the bitter cold has taken more lives in Michigan.

On Tuesday, the body 67-year-old Daniel Hayes was found in his truck—where he lived because he had no heat, electricity or running water in his house. Hayes lived in a semi-rural area of Wayne County, not far from Detroit.

“We’re figuring he lived in the truck because there was a space heater hooked up to a generator outside the vehicle,” Detective Sgt. Michael Czinski told the *Detroit News*. “The heater was inside with the cord running to the generator.” The corpses of two dogs, likely starved, were found in a doghouse near the truck.

On Wednesday, the *Detroit News* reported that the body of what was likely a homeless man was found frozen in a solid block of ice, with only its lower legs

exposed, in the elevator shaft of an abandoned warehouse in Detroit. The warehouse is home to many homeless people. In a searing indictment of social conditions in Detroit, a city whose name was once synonymous with American industrial might, the body was left for two days, even after being reported. Neither police operators nor the 911 emergency service followed up on repeated requests from a *Detroit News* reporter that the body be removed from the ice. According to the homeless inhabitants of the warehouse, the body had been there for weeks.

There are an estimated 19,000 homeless people in Detroit, or 1 in every 50 of the city’s population.

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