

# After historic blizzard, death toll rises and floods threaten Buffalo, New York

By Michelle Ryan  
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Last week's record-setting snow storm, which buried parts of Buffalo, New York, and surrounding areas in up to eight feet of snow and left 13 people dead, is giving way to a significant flood threat due to rising temperatures. The area is expected to see temperatures reach 60 degrees today, raising the danger that melting snows will overwhelm the drainage systems.

The "lake-effect" snowstorm brought six feet of snow to the region in the first 24 hours, breaking records for snowfall in the US in a 24-hour period. Up to two more feet fell over the region in the next two to three days. The storm led to the closure of a 132-mile stretch of the New York State Thruway in western New York, stranding over 150 cars and trucks for nearly two days in frigid conditions. Hundreds more drivers were stranded on city and neighboring village streets, as snowfall rates of 3-5 inches per hour made roads impassable.

The storm also led to thousands of power outages and trapped many people inside their homes, as massive accumulations of snow formed walls around houses, making it impossible to get out.

The death toll included numerous heart attacks from overexertion due to shoveling and snow-blowing large amounts of dense snow, but also included two people who died in their cars after making numerous efforts to get help from both police and the American Automobile Association (AAA), a fee-based organization that provides assistance to motorists in emergency situations.

Donald J. Abate, 46, died after being trapped in his car for over 24 hours under a 15-foot snowdrift. Abate was on his way home from work Monday night when he pulled over due to "white-out" driving conditions. Both Abate and family members on his behalf called 911, which originally told him help was on the way.

However, when further calls were made, 911 dispatchers indicated nothing could be done to help him.

Abate also called AAA, which sent out a tow-truck to assist him; however, the truck was turned away by state police when it attempted to enter the road on which he was stranded, being told there was a travel ban and they could not proceed.

Another victim, David A. Deneke, 51, also died after his car appeared to have been sideswiped by a snowplow, sending his car into a ditch. Deneke made numerous calls to both 911 and AAA, but was told it would be at least eight hours before anyone could respond. His car was buried under heavy snow and Deneke's body was found nearly two days later by a worker performing snow removal.

As residents continue to dig out, warming temperatures this week in Buffalo, accompanied by heavy rains, could lead to widespread and possibly catastrophic flooding. Though some weather experts say that the autumn soil is porous enough to absorb some of the snowmelt, many storm drains are plugged by snow and leaves, meaning that much of the melt may end up flowing into basements and onto roads. Flooding could also lead to new power outages.

In an effort to determine the potential flood threat, scientists from the National Weather Service tested the composition of the snow to determine how much water it contained. It determined that it would amount to between 3.5 to 6 inches of water when it melted. With the additional rainfall, some forecasters worry this could generate a flash flood similar to an 18-inch rainstorm, overwhelming area creeks and sewer systems.

The flood watch is in effect until 7 am on Wednesday, and there is also a high-wind warning

through Monday night that could down trees and power lines.

The predicted rain could also lead to further roof collapses as structures with heavy snow loads are strained by additional water weight. Thirty major roof collapses have already been reported, in addition to approximately 100 minor ones, including mobile home roofs and carports. Major roof collapses have included farm structures and a pharmacy. A nursing home was evacuated over fears of a roof collapse, leading to the death of one patient.

New York Senator Charles Schumer (Democrat) said that homeowners could qualify for federal money from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to repair collapsed roofs or broken heating systems. The average award is a paltry \$5,000 to \$7,000. On the other hand, businesses could be eligible for up to \$40,000, as well as for assistance for lost profits due to customers being unable to shop during driving bans.

Homeowners, including many seniors and the disabled, have been left to deal with shoveling their roofs by themselves. No coordinated response has been developed to assist society's most vulnerable people, leaving them open to injury and death as they try to save their homes. In addition they are being left vulnerable to the many swindlers who regularly descend on storm-ravaged regions of the country to take advantage of those in desperate need of help.

The best examples of coordinated help have come from the working class itself, in neighborhoods where people have formed "shovel brigades," and a Facebook group, which has coordinated volunteer assistance for people in need.

The disaster has been used as a major photo-op for New York's Democratic governor Andrew Cuomo, whose previous debacles handling Hurricanes Irene and Sandy caused major political embarrassment. It is widely anticipated that Cuomo is planning a future presidential run, and so there are desperate attempts to keep another natural disaster in the state under tight control, especially where decades of budget cuts have left infrastructure and emergency response mechanisms greatly weakened.

Many workers have suffered loss of pay due to the storms. Many will not be paid for missed days due to road closures, driving bans, workplace closures or being trapped in their homes. Others will be forced to

use vacation or sick leave allowance to make up for the lost time.

Many workers have been out of work since Tuesday due to their cars being buried under snow on the city's side streets, some of which have still not been plowed. Others are trying to locate their cars, which have been towed to city lots after roads were cleared.

The claims made by politicians and the media that no preventive measures can be taken to protect people from natural disasters that occur with ever-greater regularity and ferocity are fraudulent.

Resources are available to ensure that cities such as Buffalo have adequate snow removal equipment, as well as rescue transport, including Snowcats and snowmobiles. Coordinated planning for emergency road closures and rescue operations, as well as an emergency response for assisting the elderly, the disabled, and those with medical conditions, as well as the poor, are entirely possible with dedicated resources.

As long as society's resources are monopolized by a minuscule super-rich layer of the population, these necessities will not be made available to the working class, nor will coordinated planning efforts be possible. What is required is a redistribution of society's wealth, produced by the working class, to benefit society as a whole. This requires the overturning of the capitalist system, which subordinates all social progress to the profit motive.

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