

“There are a lot of struggling people in the Detroit Metro area”

## Hard-pressed Detroit area families face bleak holiday

By Shannon Jones  
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With the start of the holiday period, hundreds of thousands of Detroit area residents are suffering from extreme economic hardship, belying the claims of the Obama administration of an economic recovery from the 2008 economic crash. This includes poverty and the attendant problems of food insecurity, utility shutoffs and homelessness.

Tens of thousands of residents of Detroit are living without basic necessities, including running water. More than one out of 13 of the city's 175,000 residential water customers have had their service disconnected for past due bills this year, which average \$75 a month, one of the highest rates in the US. All told, the city has disconnected more than 70,000 homes since 2014.

Last week the US Court of Appeals dismissed a lawsuit filed by a group of Detroit residents seeking to stop the Detroit Department of Water and Sewerage from shutting off customers who are behind on their bills. In its ruling the court stated that Detroit's bankruptcy filing protected the city from such lawsuits. It further ruled that granting the request for a halt to water shutoffs would interfere with the city's governmental power as well as its property and revenues.

Local area food pantries contacted by the *World Socialist Web Site* reported being overwhelmed by need with the onset of the holiday season.

Linda Reyes-Flores, executive director of Latino Family Services in southwest Detroit, said, “I don't believe it is ever going to get better. We serve 200 families a week and because of Thanksgiving we had to cut from some to give to others. Today was ridiculous. At the end we just had to give out the minimal stuff, so

everyone had something.

“It seems to have gotten worse this year. You still have a lot of people without food. It is cold and you have seasonal workers who are laid off, so our traffic increases in the winter. There is poverty, people out of work, people on minimum-wage jobs and people struggling with utility bills.”

According to one report, one in every six Michigan residents is affected by hunger, including more than 700,000 in southeast Michigan. According to a 2015 report from Feeding America, across Wayne County, where the city of Detroit is located, 102,000 children live in food-insecure households.

The city is the poorest big city in the United States. Some 40 percent of the city's population, 300,000 people, live in poverty.

Reyes-Flores continued, “Even if you are receiving food stamps, that only lasts a couple of weeks, so they come here.

“Here in southwest Detroit we have a diverse population—Caucasian, Arab-American, Latino...

“A lot of people are unemployed, seniors or disabled. For workers at minimum wage it is very difficult to pay rent, utilities and buy food, especially if you have children.

“Lots of people say Detroit is getting better, but the unemployment rate is the same, water bills are going up, taxes are going up. I am sure it is marvelous for the people who are well off. It is not for the people in poverty and earning minimum wage.

“We forget about our seniors. They can't go out and work. A senior may own a house, but she can't fix the windows or a leak in the roof. It is just survival.

“What happens to that generation of people? What do

seniors do? I know a couple age 78 and 82. They walk to the pantry to get food and walk home. What I give them only lasts two days.”

Cathy Maher, executive director of Detroit Friendship House, a food pantry located in the Detroit enclave of Hamtramck, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “We have more clients this year than last year. A lot of our new clients are immigrants, not necessarily refugees. Hamtramck is very diverse. We service people in need, from all backgrounds.”

Michigan residents were hit hard by recent cuts, enacted under the Obama administration, to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or food stamps. Some one in five of Michigan residents saw cuts to benefits under changes adopted by the state earlier this year.

Maher continued, “More and more people on a regular basis are falling behind and are in need. Our clientele comes from all demographics. Easily one-third of our clients are children.

“Most of our clients are working poor. They are working at minimum wage jobs. Food prices are increasing so it is hard for them to feed their families. They are obviously living paycheck to paycheck. The slightest thing throws them off—their car breaks down or they have doctor bills. When you have no back-up, you have to resort to food pantries. Unfortunately that is happening more and more.

“Water bills have gone up substantially. Even for people who have bridge cards [food stamps], those cards provide only \$1.56-\$1.78 per meal. Basically it buys a can of soup for a meal.

“They can come here once a month and get three to four days’ worth of food. So it makes a big difference. We distribute about 54,000 pounds of food a month.”

Meanwhile, thousands of Detroit and Wayne County residents fear eviction in coming months due to the Wayne County treasurer’s yearly tax auction. The latest tax auction, completed in October, saw 14,000 properties offered for sale. Since 2005, one-third of the properties in the city—139,699 of 384,672—have been foreclosed either because of mortgage arrears or property tax delinquency.

Austin, volunteer coordinator at the South Oakland Shelter, which operates in Oakland County, north of Detroit, said that homelessness is still a big issue in the Metro Detroit area. He told the WSWS, “I have been

here seven years, and in my view homelessness is on the rise. There are a lot of struggling people in the area who don’t know how they are going to pay rent or put food on the table.

“The programs that are available are not able to meet the vast need out there. We get phone calls every day, and we are not able to accommodate everyone. Here in Oakland County there are not enough affordable housing options. In Detroit it is harder to find sustainable options, there may be more affordable units, but the landlords may not be maintaining the properties.

“In addition, there are a lot of people living in cars, living in garages or living in non-functional homes that don’t have electricity or running water.

“It is dog-eat-dog until you can earn the \$1,500-\$1,700 a month you need to pay rent, car insurance, utilities and food.”

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