NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

Kenya Jones fills a bucket with water at a vacant house in her east side Detroit neighborhood. Jones has been without water at home for a month because her landlord has not paid the bill.

IN FOCUS

In Detroit, Water Crisis Symbolizes Decline, and Hope

As poor residents strain to pay bills, neighbors and activists step up.

11 MINUTE READ

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DETROIT—ROCHELLE MCCASKILL WAS in her bathroom about to rinse the soap off her hands when the water stopped. Slowed by lupus and other ailments, she made her way to a bedroom window, peered out, and spotted a guy fiddling with her water valve.

"There must be a mistake," she yelled down.

McCaskill explained that she had just paid $80 on her $540.41 overdue bill, enough, she thought, to avoid a shutoff. The man wasn't interested in the details. He cranked off her water and marked the sidewalk by her valve with bright blue spray paint, a humiliation inflicted on delinquent customers that McCaskill likened to "a scarlet letter." Then he drove off in a truck with the red, white, and black logo dreaded citywide: "Detroit Water Collections Project."

Nearly 19,500 Detroiters have had their water service interrupted since March 1. The Water and Sewerage Department, under pressure to reduce more than $90 million in bad debt, ordered shutoffs for customers who owed at least $150 or had fallen at least two months behind on their bills. The decision to take such drastic measures, done with little warning, ignited a controversy that prompted protests and arrests, more bad publicity for the struggling city, global dismay, and a warning from the United Nations.

DeMeeko Williams, spokesman for the Detroit Water Brigade, leads a small protest with a bullhorn outside the municipal building while activists from the water-advocacy organization

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As unusual as it is for the U.N. to raise public health concerns in a country like the United States, these are unusual times in Detroit. The fortunes of this once-prosperous home of the auto industry have plummeted so far that last year it became the largest city ever to file for bankruptcy. The population has dropped from nearly 1.8 million a half century ago to fewer than 700,000 today. Democratic rule was suspended last year when Michigan's governor appointed an emergency manager to take control.

Now, although Detroit as founded on a river, draws its name from a French word for "strait," and lies between two of the Great Lakes, water has become scarce for some of its poorest residents. With more than 40 percent of Detroiters living in poverty, the highest big-city rate in the nation, scraping together the money for something as basic as water can be a struggle unfamiliar to most American households.

Despite her illnesses, McCaskill, 54, still speaks and moves with the good-natured resolve that must have served her well during the 23 years she worked as a patient care assistant for hospice patients. Now on disability, her $672 monthly check covers only her $600 rent and minimal groceries without help from her family. A native Detroiter, she knows her way around a city whose services have been mostly in decline during her lifetime. But living without running water?

"I started crying," she recalled. "I was frightened."

I first encountered McCaskill five days later, on a cloudy Saturday morning in early August. Some 400 Detroiters descended on the water department's east side customer service office, queued up to discuss payment plans to restore or preserve their water. When McCaskill and her daughter, L'Oréal, 25, stepped out of the building, they were surrounded by a chaotic scene: police officers patrolling on horseback, protesters shouting over loudspeakers, activists in reflective safety vests arguing with city workers.

DeMeeko Williams of the Detroit Water Brigade delivers water to Kenya Jones at her home on Detroit's east side, where she lives with two teenage daughters and a nephew. Their water was shut off a month ago.

But McCaskill had good news: The city had agreed to turn her water back on. The news prompted one of the activists, Justin Wedes of the Detroit Water Brigade, to give her a big hug.

It had been quite a week. Returning home, McCaskill apologized for the broken blinds as she ushered me into the compact living room where she spends much of her day, often in the company of energetic children whose playthings include the blinds. With her niece, Selena, ten, perched next to her on a small brown couch, McCaskill showed me a letter from her doctor stating that she needs a hot bath with bleach every day to treat a persistent staph infection.

With no water, she recalled, "I had no idea what I was going to do.

Kenya Jones and her 15-year-old daughter, Armonni, brush their teeth in the kitchen. Jones has been out of work for three months after she quit a janitorial job at an elementary school where she made $7.55 an hour and had no benefits. She is hoping to land a job at a plant that pays $10 an hour.

What happened next to McCaskill is a story that has been repeated across a city that's emerging as one of America's most intriguing, if still deeply troubled, urban centers. Municipal ineptitude and human misery are converging with generosity and innovation. Neighbors across the street and people across the nation—and even across the border in Canada—stepped in to help, in some cases creating organizations to assist residents who were not being helped by their own city.

Long-Ignored Water Bills Lead to City Crisis

Like a lot of people, I couldn't imagine what was going on when I first heard about thousands of Detroiters having their water shut off. I no longer live in Detroit, but I worked as a journalist there for more than

15 years and still come often to the city to work on a start-up news operation. I've learned enough about the water department to know that years of lax enforcement had rendered its monthly bills as little more than optional reminders in the budgets of many hard-pressed Detroiters.

When the department was pushed by the city's bankruptcy to remedy that, it skipped such common shutoff alerts as door hangers and failed to deploy enough representatives to help customers. City officials say that every dollar that goes unpaid by one Detroiter must be paid by others and insist that a revised enforcement plan will be fair to all and accommodating to Detroiters unable to pay.

The city is paying a private company $5.6 million to shut off water in homes, but it's unclear how much it is doing to target commercial customers, a dozen with past-due amounts exceeding $100,000 each. The water department shut off water to 157 businesses for nonpayment since March 1, but service has been restored to all of them. About 5,450 homes, an unknown number vacant, remain without water.

To gauge the chaos engulfing the city's collection efforts, tke a look at the list of more than 28,000 bills the department describes as "undeliverable" on its website. Among the overdue commercial accounts, you'll find $11,218.36 for Ford Field, where the National Football League's Detroit Lions play their home games. In the bill-pay section of the site, the same address also is associated with J.L. Hudson, the department store that was demolished in 1998.

In July and August, I spoke with a wide range of Detroiters affected by the water crisis, some of them waterless, many recently so and still more in fear of becoming so. Thousands have spent time this summer in all three categories.

More than 80 percent of Detroiters are African-American, but the city's water troubles seep indiscriminately across color, age, and circumstance. I spoke with Arab-Americans, African-Americans,

Mexican-Americans, and whites—young and old—struggling to keep water running in their homes.

Robin Wilson, 59, a retired narcotics officer already supporting the city's recovery efforts through taking an expected cut in her police pension, was livid when she emerged from the water department's customer service center downtown. After having her water turned off, then on, she found herself back on the shutoff list. Her latest trouble? Failing to pay the $100 turn-on fee.

On Fire Ministries, a small church on Detroit's west side, distributes water provided by the Detroit Water Brigade. At left, assistant Pastor Tamesha Walker and Pastor Rose Pride lead the

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In late July, the emergency manager returned control of the department to City Hall. After years of corruption and place-holding in the mayor's office, the new guy, Mike Duggan, has already made an impact. His latest Detroit Dashboard shows 723 streetlights installed, 768 tons of illegal dumping hauled away, and 296 blighted homes removed. "Had I been given charge of the water department when I asked for it, this never would have happened," he said. "It was very frustrating to watch what I thought was a preventable problem."

Under the system that wreaked so much havoc, Duggan said, residents "didn't know whether the shutoff would happen in a week or a year." He said residents behind on the bills now would find a clear, seven-day warning on their doorknobs before losing their water. Besides streamlining a process that has created so many "frustrated and angry customers," the mayor says the department will add 50 customer service workers. He also says that Detroiters unable to pay will find it easier to get help.

Duggan is especially critical of the bureaucratic obstacles erected by the water department: "We had people who got to the front of the line and

said, 'I want to pay my mom's water bill,' and they were told, 'You'll have to prove that your mom lives in that house.'"

Ross Howard was overwhelmed with emotion when the Detroit Water Project, which matches donors with those in need, paid his overdue water bill. A social worker and single father with

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That's the sort of policy that's left 42-year-old Kenya Jones and her family without water for the past month. Her overdue bill of $866.40 was complicated because the account was in the name of her 20-year-old son, Adonnis. She hopes to get the water flowing again next week by putting the account in her name and making a payment of $112, money earned from her job packing tomatoes for $8 an hour.

In the meantime, the Jones family fills buckets and milk jugs with water each evening at a recently vacated house in the neighborhood that still has service, and hauls them home.

Built on Water, Detroit Struggles to Bring It to Citizens

Water has played a critical role in Detroit for more than three centuries.

Just last month, the home of the 313 telephone area code celebrated the 313th anniversary of the day French explorer Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac steered his canoe to the shore of the river he called Détroit du Lac Érié, for "Strait of Lake Erie." The three-acre fortress he founded would become the biggest city in the state known as the Great Lakes State, a big mitten surrounded by 84 percent of North America's surface freshwater.

As the city entered its second century in the early 1800s, the population of 2,000 was still getting its water in buckets and barrels hauled from the Detroit River by hand and two-wheeled carts. Horse-powered pumps and pipes made of hollowed-out logs took their place.

It wasn't too long after the city began delivering water to people's homes that it also started turning it off. This ad appeared in Detroit newspapers on April 10, 1845:

PAY YOUR WATER TAXES—Every man and woman who does not pay up by Monday ... will be reported to the Council, and the water in every case shut off. I am not joking.
— Morgan Bates, City Collector

Then as now, it became clear that simply turning off the water was no way to run a city that was home to people of varying means. In 1854, the water department installed special hydrants at nine locations aimed at making clean water available to anyone who needed it. The move was hailed at the time as a smart way to "promote the health of the poorer classes."

Chester Clemons (left), with the company that handles the Detroit Water Collections Project, turns on the water at Garth Ulmer's home on Detroit's west side. Ulmer (right), who uses a wheelchair, was without water for three weeks until he got his landlord to pay the late bill.

A century and a half later, Detroit's shutoffs prompted U.N. human rights experts to declare that access to water is such a fundamental human right that it should be denied only to people who *are* able to pay for it but refuse to do so.

In Detroit, Across the Country, People Step Up to Help

The ability to pay is at the heart of countless debates these days in Detroit, as bankruptcy attorneys argue on behalf of retirees, debtors, and vendors owed money by the city. Amid the turmoil, many Detroiters are left to look out for one another.

Harriet Green, 45, lives in a modest brick bungalow across the street from McCaskill. As soon as she spotted the water truck, she knew what was up. Although she had never met McCaskill and didn't know her

name until I told her, Green filled a couple of jugs with water and lugged them across the street. "I had my water turned off a couple of years ago," she told me. "I know what it's like."

Relieved to have some water in the house, McCaskill said she closed her eyes and prayed. "Then my friend's name popped into my head, and I knew who to call." As McCaskill tells it, Valerie Burris, her friend from Mumford High School, "has Facebook and knows all that stuff!"

She says, "Valerie told me, 'Don't worry, Rochelle. I got you!'"

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Rochelle McCaskill, who lives with two daughters, a son-in-law, and a grandson, had her water shut off at her Detroit home for a week. McCaskill's water was turned back on after water department officials gave her an exemption due to her medical conditions.

Burris contacted the Detroit Water Brigade, which Wedes helped start in June. A Detroit-area native who helped launch Occupy Wall Street, the movement protesting economic inequality, Wedes returned home from Brooklyn when he heard about the shutoffs. Before McCaskill had used up the water delivered by her neighbor, the Water Brigade was on her porch with more.

"People are outraged at the idea of denying water to people who need it," Wedes said as he and Brigade colleague DeMeeko Williams unloaded water from a rental car.

The group enlists volunteers, raises donations (more than $31,000 so far), and tracks developments on its Facebook page and Twitter feed. Wedes knows how to exploit those platforms. He supports himself as a freelance Web designer and social media consultant, and still directs social media for the Occupy movement.

Social media and news reports about the crisis also have inspired volunteers with no ties to Detroit. In July, for example, a group of

Canadians drove 750 gallons of water in a seven-vehicle caravan through the tunnel beneath the Detroit River to City Hall.

In Salt Lake City, 31-year-old Shannon Harton learned about the water crisis after clicking on a Facebook link to a Huffington Post article about Detroit. By the time she finished soliciting contributions via Facebook and email, Harton had raised about $500 and spent about $3,000 of her own money to buy and ship more than 9,000 bottles of water and to cover travel costs for herself and a friend, who helped distribute the water.

"This stirred something within me," Harton told me by phone. "I've been telling everybody I know about the situation, and a lot of people don't believe me at first, asking me, 'Are you sure? Is this really happening in Michigan?'"

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Leaks in unoccupied houses tax the Detroit water department's resources. A vacant home (left) on the city's west side is painted to indicate the water was shut off. Quincy Bey (right) has

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Another conversation—this one on Twitter between two women on opposite sides of the country—led to an initiative called the Detroit Water Project.

"Is there a directory ... where people in Detroit can go for water relief?" tweeted Tiffani Bell, a 29-year-old in Oakland, California, who works with Code for America, a nonprofit that seeks to use technology to solve community problems.

Kristy Tillman, 30, a digital designer working for a start-up in Boston, tweeted back: "@tiffani I have been asking this, too. I'd pay someone's water bill if I could pay directly."

Three weeks later, the project they built had poured more than $84,000 into the water department on behalf of more than 700 customers. The founders and their team are struggling to keep up with more than 8,000 volunteers who have registered on their site. Offers have ranged from $1 to $2,500.

Beth Campbell, an attorney in Sacramento, California, offered to pay a bill up to $100 and was matched with a recipient whose bill was just over $95. "I have no personal or family connection to Detroit except that I used to date someone who was from there," Campbell wrote in an email. "I'm just horrified by what is happening to the people who can't pay their water bills."

Ross Howard, a 45-year-old single father of seven, described his reaction to learning that his overdue bill of $773.56 had been paid by the Detroit Water Project: "I cried like a baby."

When I asked him what kind of work he does, he answered: "I'm a social worker, believe it or not."

In pursuit of a 21st-century version of those special hydrants, Tillman said they're now exploring how the water department might connect customers in need with agencies offering help. "What started us down this road is a strong point of view of using tech for good," Tillman explained.

But like so much of what's unfolding these days in Detroit, optimism about emerging solutions is filtered through the reality of new and persistent problems. Just four days after Duggan announced plans to ease the shutoffs, the city was hit with the biggest rainfall and worst flooding in 89 years.

With a new round of enforcement set to begin Monday, the water department is introducing a new smartphone application aimed at enlisting citizen help with one of the great ironies of its water crisis: the wasted water spraying from broken pipes in many of the city's 78,000

abandoned buildings. Living up to the name that city leaders chose for the app won't be easy: Detroit Delivers.

Bill Mitchell is a co-founder of Detroit143.org, a local news start-up. Follow him on Twitter.