

BY EMILY GREEN  
SENIOR STAFF REPORTER

Michigan's water crises have attracted national attention as residents in a state practically surrounded by water struggle to access it.

From lead-poisoned drinking water in Flint to the massive water utility shut-offs in Detroit, impoverished communities of color are bearing the brunt of discriminatory policies that effectively deny them their most basic of human needs.

What's happening in Flint and Detroit could be cause for alarm across the nation. The installation of governor-appointed emergency managers, who supersede control of elected officials, exacerbates problems caused by austerity measures put in place, predominantly in African-American neighborhoods, following Detroit's bankruptcy filing in 2013.

Detroit has the highest poverty rate among the 20 largest U.S. cities, at 35.7 percent. The national rate is 14 percent. Low incomes in combination with high water prices mean tens of thousands of households have their water shut off each year.

In the wake of problems facing African-American communities in Detroit, resident and lifelong activist Monica Lewis-Patrick has become a prominent voice. In 2008, Lewis-Patrick and four other African-American women co-founded We the People of Detroit, a nonprofit that informs and empowers residents on issues related to land, water, civil rights, education and the democratic process. It also delivers water to the doorsteps of those who cannot otherwise access it.

Lewis-Patrick will be in Portland on May 4 to sit on a panel with Cat Goughnour of the Right 2 Root campaign.

Organized by Portland-based nonprofit Recode, the panel will highlight the relationship between planning decisions, gentrification and displacement and how Portland can reduce wealth and infrastructure disparities. State and local-level elected officials and other interested parties, including members of the public, are expected to attend the free event from 6 to 8 p.m. at Humboldt Gardens.

Lewis-Patrick spoke to Street Roots about the situation in Detroit and why Portland should be paying attention.

**Emily Green:** First I wanted to give our readers a sense of the situation in Detroit, and I was hoping you could begin by talking about something Detroit residents refer to as "the blue line of shame." Can you explain what that is?

**Monica Lewis-Patrick:** The blue line of shame in Detroit is where the water department, Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, goes out to the homes that are in jeopardy of losing their water service and



PHOTO COURTESY OF MONICA LEWIS-PATRICK  
Monica Lewis-Patrick is president and co-founder of We the People of Detroit, a nonprofit that informs residents about land, water, civil rights, education and democratic issues.

## DETROIT'S WATER WARRIOR

*Michigan could be 'the canary in the mine' for communities like Portland, water-equality activist Monica Lewis-Patrick says*

mark a very bold and large blue line in front of the house. Sometimes it's just a singular line. Sometimes it's an arrow pointing to the water shut off connection. What it does is it alerts the whole community that you're in jeopardy of having your water shut off.

**E.G.:** We the People of Detroit, the nonprofit you are a CEO, president and co-founder of, did a mapping project that revealed the city was more aggressively shutting off water in African-American neighborhoods.

**M.L.P.:** That's correct. They're shutting off water systematically in particular neighborhoods where they want to clear out the population and bring in a new population. We did something called "Mapping the Water Crisis: The Dismantlement of African-American Neighborhoods in Detroit." What we did was convene about 25 researchers that are experts in everything from GIS mapping to architecture to water infrastructure. Also, several of them had Ph.D.s in education, chemistry and physics. We convened them together to really be able to leverage their expertise because many times when they

won't believe the activists, they'll believe the academics.

**E.G.:** Most people know if they don't pay their utility bill, the utilities will eventually be shut off. That seems to be pretty universal in the U.S., but in Detroit, the U.N. actually got involved in the water shut-offs, and I believe you testified before the U.N. on this matter. What was it about the whole situation that made the U.N. deem the shut-offs to be a human rights violation?

**M.L.P.:** Well it's a human rights violation because the vast majority of Detroiters are paying more than 10 percent of their income to access water.

Over the last 10 years, water rates have gone up over 126 percent. As a matter of fact, over the last 20 years, it's gone up as much as 400 percent. In terms of the rate structure, it's not equitable and it's not fair. Detroit is bearing the burden of building out this system to 126 municipalities and townships. If they were spreading that across all 126 municipalities and townships, you would see a fair rate structure.

Right now, Detroit and Flint are the only

municipalities in the 126 service areas that have these very aggressive water shut-off policies. Most of these cities have policies that say it doesn't matter how much you owe; your water won't be shut off. Then in a few other cities, they have policies that say you have up to two to three consecutive billing cycles. In those communities, billing cycles are anywhere from two to three months. So you could go almost a year without paying your water bill before you're even threatened with a shut-off, whereas in Detroit and Flint, it's 30 days.

There was research that was done by Michigan State University at the beginning of the year – I think it was released in the top of February – which states that 35 percent of America, by the year 2020, will not be able to afford their water. So for us, it's about the human right to water. It's not about free water, but it's about a rate structure that is fair and equitable. And we believe that people should not be paying more than 3.5 percent of their income to access water.

**E.G.:** Do you see a connection between the water crisis in Flint and the water crisis in Detroit, and if so, can you explain that connection to our readers?

**M.L.P.:** Yes. The Flint water crisis and the Flint poisoning are deeply connected to the Detroit water shut-off. Both of those issues are driven by basically the bottom line: greed. You have the governor of the state of Michigan using his powers as the executive of the state under this very egregious law called Emergency Management Law, which is funded by the Cato Institute and the Koch Brothers, and 37 states have some form of this preemptive piece of legislation. A lot of times people don't even know it. What it allows them to do is set aside democracy. It allows them to set aside elected officials. It allows them to close up union contracts. It allows them to sell off and skin off assets of municipalities and school systems without a vote of the people. It allows one person to act as dictator and king. What we found is that in the state of Michigan, it was reported on "The Rachel Maddow Show" that 53 percent of the African-American population of the state of Michigan has been under this austerity law.

When you look at Detroit and Flint, both cities have an emergency manager. Both cities were advised by Veolia, which is one of the worst water management entities in the world, that Flint should drink poison water. They also advised Detroit that they should privatize their operations. Detroit at one point had a system that was managed by engineers and chemists and botanists and citizens, a very robust system. That system now has been reduced to no more than high

See WATER, page 5