

NEWS

In final tally, state officials say 246 Texans died in February from freeze and power loss



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State officials have determined that 246 people died for reasons related to the freeze and power grid failure last February that left many Texans without heat and electricity for days, though outside experts have said the victim count is probably much higher.

Of those, 28 died in Travis County, six in Williamson County and one in Bastrop County, the newly released Department of State Health Services report says. No victims were listed in Hays County.

State officials called the count a final tally.

As people froze to death or lost limbs to frostbite, dozens of the power plants entrusted to keep residents warm and safe faltered — just as they did in 2011. In an apparent case of ignoring lessons from the past, nearly 75% of power generation units that sustained outages 10 years ago — when another snow-and-ice event packed unusual force — also had shutdowns or reduced electrical production in February. But this time, the weather brought the electricity grid that serves the bulk of the state to near collapse as many additional units foundered as well.

Could it happen again? Winter to test Texas power grid reforms after February disaster

State health officials refused to release the names of the winter storm victims or confirm whether certain individuals were on the list, citing federal health privacy laws. The Travis County medical examiner's office has released the names and causes of death of all the cases it handled that week, but the ME's office does not handle all deaths that occur.

Hypothermia and frostbite accounted for 65% of the deaths state officials counted. Some in Travis County died of hypothermia inside a home but without power, including 85-year-old Manjula Shah, who died after staying in front of a fireplace for days in her Northwest Hills house while her daughters took care of her.

"Why should Texas be so isolated in its grid that it can't get power from somewhere else, because of decisions made by politicians?" said her daughter Rajeeta Shah. "The U.S. is not a Third World country, where you don't have power for so many days. That's because of negligence."

The second most common reason was exacerbation of pre-existing illness, with 10% of Texas victims dying from illnesses that were respiratory or cardiovascular or because of renal failure. Other causes of death included car crashes, carbon monoxide exposure, fires and falls.

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In Travis County, 71-year-old Diana Martinez Rangel needed dialysis treatments three times a week, but her dialysis center shuttered because of a lack of electricity. The day before Satellite Dialysis in Mueller reopened, she died.

Using guidance from the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Texas officials counted victims by going through death certificates, disaster-related documents and information from death scene investigation records.

A BuzzFeed News report estimated that roughly 700 Texans actually died from the freeze and lack of power, based on how drastically deaths spiked above average that week when residents went days without electricity in below-freezing temperatures.

In total, 198 people died in Travis County from Feb. 14 to Feb. 20, though only 86 people had died the previous week, according to state health officials.

Victims ranged in age from younger than 1 to 102 years old, with the majority of deaths occurring among men, non-Hispanic whites, and those age 60 and older.

