



## The Flint Water Crisis A Summary Report

The Flint Water Crisis is a direct result of what happens when a community lacks the political capital that assures a voice in governance and the ability to hold agencies/politicians accountable. When the economic crisis hit Michigan, and the state was facing serious budget shortfalls, the state dramatically reduced revenue sharing to cities. As a result, a number of cities, faced with serious revenue shortfalls, fell under Emergency Management (EM) by the state. For the record, LWVMI took a position against Michigan's Emergency Management law based on LWV's position on Representative Government.

Written into the latest EM law was a clause (Sect 141.1560) which provided EMs with immunity from liability and legal defense from the Attorney General's office in the event of a lawsuit. The Attorney General's office is one of the agencies conducting an investigation into the Flint Water Crisis; in a paradoxical twist, if charges were to be filed against an emergency manager, the state would have to contract with the Attorney General's office for the emergency manager's defense.

The history of water distribution for Flint and Genesee County is a long one. Over the years, rate hikes coming through the Detroit Water & Sewerage Department (DWSD), now the Great Lakes Regional Water Authority (GLWA), were common. Many communities had no real negotiating power, as there were no alternative choices. The Genesee County Drain Commissioner presented the concept of a new water source - the Karegnondi pipeline and, in 2010, the Genesee County Commissioners voted to support the Karegnondi Water Authority, and other communities followed. Current Mayor, Karen Weaver, is considering whether to keep the commitment to the KWA or come up with an alternate plan.

For Flint, there were actually two decisions regarding water. The first was to switch to the Karegnondi; it was supported by Mayor Walling and the Flint City Council – primarily as a means gain some control over Flint's water supply and cost. The second was to use the Flint River in the interim. Who, exactly, made the decisions regarding the switch to the Flint River has received much debate. The switch to the Flint River was a result of friction with the DWSD and cost savings under the EM; again, there are many versions of who said what, which is a key reason for the ongoing investigations. It should be noted that the City of Flint and the City of Detroit were both under emergency management at the time.

Unfortunately, Flint's water treatment plant had not been in use for some time and needed to come up to speed – in knowledge and practice. The stories vary, but the end result was that water was not appropriately treated – for contaminants and for corrosiveness. Anti-corrosive chemicals would have cost in the neighborhood of \$100/day for the entire water supply. Ultimately, it was the corrosiveness of the water that resulted in lead being leached into the water supply from the pipeline.

Flint's universities and some local businesses quickly put additional filtration systems in their facilities. General Motors quietly switched sources of water from the Flint supply back to the DWSD after parts were found corroding. However, Flint residents were at the mercy of 'the system' which apparently lied to the public, used questionable testing practices, and falsified data - leaving the people vulnerable.

Thus far, there has been a Governor appointed investigatory committee, a State Police investigation, an Attorney General investigation, and a Federal investigation; the first two have been completed with the Governor's task

force finding the state primarily responsible and the State Police finding no criminal misconduct. The AG's investigation is not yet complete but a couple of Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) staffers and one Flint Department of Public Works official have been charged with the crime of falsifying data.

Funding a response to the Water Crisis has been tied up in politics and bureaucracy. To date, very few pipes have been replaced but the pipes have been treated with Phosphates to re-coat them as a means to limit further exposure to lead. During the month of May, residents have been asked to flush their pipes daily to move the Phosphates through the system; in return, the state of Michigan is covering the cost of their May water bills. Much of the response has been a lot of 'triage' providing Flint residents with kitchen faucet filters and bottled water.

Further concerns and responses include:

- Communication: sadly, because the community is poor and many are illiterate, there is not good access to the internet or news. Grassroots groups state that there are still pockets of people who do not understand that there is a crisis and their health could be affected.
- Skin Rashes: many still suffer from skin rashes when they bathe and the CDC is one of the partners working on this issue.
- Bottled water: was being distributed by the National Guard but the state is now paying some Flint residents to staff water distribution sites. Silver lining: the city has adopted a curbside recycling program to accommodate the huge increase in waste.
- Health Insurance: access to expanded Medicaid has been approved for youth under 21 and women who were pregnant at the time of the crisis. This access is not limited to the poor but those over 400% of the FPL must buy into the program. Thus far, we have not heard of insurance companies denying health access for concerns related to lead exposure, but we would be naive not to expect that; we have heard of people not being able to get lead testing through their private insurance – so they have had to go to the county health department.
- City Infrastructure and Exposure: city records of pipeline infrastructure were filed on index cards and incomplete. A professor from UM-Flint was tasked with mapping the city's infrastructure but it has been very challenging. Note: the delivery system was designed for a population over twice the size of the current city, resulting in a slower water flow in areas of the city.
  - In an area that was determined to have one of the highest lead levels, the pipeline was uncovered only to discover it was galvanized steel.
  - Strangely, neighbors, whose homes were built at the same time, are showing some dramatically differing results – one neighbor will be very high, while an adjacent house may test in a normal range.
- Housing: values have certainly suffered. Some citizens have simply walked away from their homes, others are having challenges getting out of rental agreements. Many report feeling trapped.
- Home Infrastructure: not only was the city's distribution system compromised, but each home's system was compromised. Pipes, faucets, hot water tanks, etc. all became suspect.
  - Early in the response, a number of plumbers came to town and donated their services to go door-to-door to make sure filters were installed. In some homes the faucets were so old they had to install new ones just so the filters would attach.
- Lawsuits: A number of lawsuits have been filed and more may likely be filed. Federal Judge John Corbett O'Meara recently dismissed a \$150M class action lawsuit, telling the plaintiffs to refile in Michigan. The Natural Resources Defense Council is one plaintiff in another suit demanding safe water. In April, a \$220M

lawsuit was filed against the EPA, claiming it was negligent in the toxic water crisis that contributed dangerous levels of lead to the city's water supply. In May, the NAACP filed suit against the state of Michigan. These are but a few of the many lawsuits.

- Emotional: the citizens of Flint have been emotionally harmed by this political/bureaucratic betrayal.
- The Governor has secured (taxpayer funded) legal counsel at a cost of up to \$1.2M.

Nutrition was, perhaps, one of the saddest discoveries. Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, Director of the Pediatric Residency Program, Hurley Medical Center, stated that the children in Flint had such poor nutrition in their diets that, when they were exposed to the lead-contamination, their bodies quickly absorbed the lead. She went on to state that if the exposure had happened in a more affluent community, where the children had better diets, the results would not be anywhere near as tragic.

The good news on nutrition is that diets high in Calcium, Iron, and Vitamin C can help alleviate lead exposure. The Food Bank of Southeastern Michigan currently has a mobile food truck traversing the city with foods in these categories as part of the response. Additionally, the state has provided school day snacks high in these for students, including those in 'choice' schools throughout the county. Various groups are also partnering with the Flint Farmer's Market for demonstrations on how to include these foods in family diets.

While lead can quickly leave the blood stream, it gets absorbed into other parts of the body. Dr. Hanna-Attisha has discussed many of the following concerns at meetings she has attended and the CDC also has detailed information on their website (<http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/csem/csem.asp?csem=7&po=10>). Briefly stated, lead toxicity can be harmful to organ systems throughout the body. Potential problem areas include: the heart (hypertension), bones (development and health, including slow growth), intestines (cramping/pain), kidneys (gout, potentially renal disease), reproductive system (lower sperm count & motility, potential miscarriage), and nervous system (irritability, nervousness, malaise, cognitive performance, etc). Lead also inhibits the ability of the body to make hemoglobin resulting in anemia. In children, it can cause learning impairment, lowering of IQ, and behavior disorders including confusion, irritability and more – which can continue into adulthood. Sadly, Flint residents will become part of a large study population to learn more about lead exposure.

There are a number of grassroots groups doing their best to help educate the public. Sadly, there remain pockets of people who do not know about the problem, are afraid to come forward (e.g., immigrants), or just simply don't understand that the water filters need to be changed. Unfortunately, despite numerous weekly meetings where these groups can share, there does not appear to be anyone coordinating or tracking the responses on a physical map to see where people are being reached and where they are not.

The LWV of the Flint Area shares key information sources on their web page, they post regular information updates on their FaceBook page, and they have partnered with the LWV Michigan to send letters to the Governor – sharing concerns and generally letting him know they are monitoring the situation. Additionally, the Flint Area League has been conducting voter registrations throughout Flint and voter registration trainings that are open to any individual or group to participate. Supported by the LWV Youth Voter Registration grant, we have registered 700 new voters this year, many in Flint.