

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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January 12, 2016

The Honorable Jason Chaffetz
Chairman
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Cynthia Lummis
Chairman
Subcommittee on the Interior
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Chaffetz and Chairman Lummis:

I am writing to urge you to hold a hearing as soon as possible on the public health crisis of high concentrations of lead in the drinking water of the City of Flint, Michigan. For the families of the affected children, this has been, and will continue to be, a terrible tragedy. As a resident of the State of Michigan and Representative of the neighboring Congressional District, I believe this was a man-made disaster created by the poor policy decisions of elected and career government officials. Probing and preventing such catastrophes falls squarely within the jurisdiction of the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform.

In 2013, facing a fiscal crisis and at the insistence of the Michigan Governor, the City of Flint ended its 50 year contract with Detroit for drinking water and sewage service and entered into a new contract to receive water from the Flint River. Promised financial savings amounted to \$19 million over eight years.

Almost immediately, residents complained about the discolored and pungent water. But officials repeatedly downplayed their concerns. Evidence has emerged that elected and career government officials knew, or should have known, about the risks to human health posed by their policy decision to save money by switching public water supplies. Corrosive chemicals in Flint River water were causing pipelines to leach toxins into the drinking water of Flint's residents.

Within a year, carcinogens and lead were discovered in the water. The Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) found high levels of total trihalomethanes (TTHM) in Flint water, which have been shown to cause cancer and affect central nervous systems. Independent research, conducted by Professor Marc Edwards of Virginia Tech University, released results from a report which concluded that Flint drinking water is “very corrosive,” and noted that one sample measured as high as 13,200 parts of lead per billion. Later that month, research conducted by Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha of Hurley Children’s Hospital showed that the number of Flint infants and children who were found to have elevated levels of lead in their blood jumped since the city switched its water source to the Flint River. The long-term consequences of lead poisoning are devastating for children. According to the World Health Organization, “[a]t high levels of acute exposure, lead attacks the brain and central nervous system to cause coma, convulsions and even death. Children who survive acute lead poisoning are typically left with grossly obvious mental retardation and behavioral disruption.” After the repeated complaints of parents, community leaders, doctors, and independent researchers, on October 1, 2015, Genesee County officials declared a public health emergency and urged Flint residents to not drink the city’s water.¹

Finally, in a long overdue action, on January 5, 2016, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder declared a state of emergency for Flint and Genesee County, and switched the city back to Detroit water.² But the damage was done. Thousands of children could be permanently injured by the lead in the water they drank and bathed in during this public health catastrophe.³ Local, state, and federal officials all failed to protect the health of the residents of Flint.

The situation in Flint represents a crisis of leadership on all levels, and we must ensure that we take the appropriate steps to ensure that similar situations do not occur elsewhere. The hearing should examine the actions of key decision-makers who played a role in the development of this completely avoidable crisis. At a minimum, the following individuals should be invited to testify:

1. Honorable Rick Snyder, Governor of Michigan, (2011 – Present).
2. Dan Wyant, former Director of Michigan Department of Environmental Quality and participant in the decision not to treat water with anti-corrosives. The Michigan Department of Environmental Quality assured the public that the water was safe to use

¹ World Health Organization, *Childhood Lead Poisoning* (online at <http://www.who.int/ceh/publications/leadguidance.pdf>).

² *Snyder Declares Emergency as Feds Probe Flint Water*, Detroit Free Press (Jan. 6, 2016) (online at <http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2016/01/05/us-attorneys-office-investigating-lead-flint-water/78303960/>).

³ *In Flint, Michigan, Overpriced Water is Causing People’s Skin to Erupt in Rashes and Hair to Fall Out*, The Nation (July 16, 2015)(online at <http://www.thenation.com/article/in-flint-michigan-overpriced-water-is-causing-peoples-skin-to-erupt-and-hair-to-fall-out/>).

and consume, yet independent testing found that the water was unsafe for human consumption.⁴

3. Dayne Walling, former Mayor of Flint, Michigan (2009-2015). The Flint water crisis unraveled during the tenure of Mayor Walling, who repeatedly stated that the water quality was safe to use.
4. Susan Hedman, Region 5 Director, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The EPA has conducted some testing of the Flint drinking water and is offering technical support to the State on abatement of lead in the water.
5. Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, Director, Pediatric Residency Program, Hurley Medical Center. As a doctor on the front lines of the Flint water crisis, Dr. Hanna-Attisha was one of the first experts to voice concerns about the health of children drinking Flint water after the switch.
6. Hon. Karen Weaver— Mayor, City of Flint. Ms. Weaver has been monitoring the water crisis before her election as Mayor and specifically reported her growing concerns to the Department of Environmental Quality and Governor Snyder.

I hope that we can work together in a bipartisan manner to probe this issue on behalf of the residents of Flint and other Americans, to ensure that similar crises do not occur in the future.

Sincerely,



Brenda Lawrence
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on the Interior

Enclosure

cc: The Honorable Elijah E. Cummings, Ranking Member, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

⁴ *Virginia Tech Researcher Accuses State Health Officials of "Hiding" Data on Flint's Water*, Michigan Radio (Dec. 21, 2015) (online at <http://michiganradio.org/post/virginia-tech-researcher-accuses-state-health-officials-hiding-data-flints-water#stream/0>).