Message

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Subject: Associated Press: Michigan city on edge as lead water crisis persists (November 4)

FYI, this just popped up ...

Associated Press: Michigan city on edge as lead water crisis persists (November 4)

BENTON HARBOR, Mich. (AP) — Shortly after sunrise on a recent Saturday in Benton Harbor, Michigan, residents began lining up for free bottled water so they could drink and cook without fear of the high levels of lead in the city's tap water.

Free water distribution sites are a fixture of life in the majority Black city in the southwestern corner of Michigan, where almost half of the nearly 10,000 residents live below the poverty line. For three years, tests of its public water system revealed elevated levels of lead.

Waiting for free bottled water is time consuming and some residents wonder why, in a state that recently dealt with the Flint water crisis, the problem wasn't fixed sooner.

"It's tiresome," said Rhonda Nelson, waiting in line at a site run by the Boys & Girls Clubs of Benton Harbor.

"I understand what Flint was going through, I really do," she said.

Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer has promised to spend millions of dollars to replace the city's lead service lines within 18 months – a blistering pace for a process that often takes decades. For now, residents have been warned not to cook, drink or make baby formula with tap water.

Residents worry what the elevated lead levels mean for their families' health. The problem is also inconvenient and stressful. Drivers line up at water distribution sites early, pulling people away from jobs and family. Bottled water must be used carefully so it doesn't run out. Even waiting in line has consequences – idling uses gas that drivers have to pay to replenish more often.

Waiting in line, LaKeena Crawford worried about the consequences for her 8-year-old daughter, who she has seen try to turn on the water.

"I'm like, 'No!'" Crawford said, adding that she wants her daughter to understand that lead in water is dangerous. But, "I don't want to frighten her too much."

Lead exposure can slow cognitive development, especially in young children, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and federal officials say no amount of lead in drinking water is considered safe for their consumption. In recent months, activists have pushed for more immediate, aggressive action, and the state has ramped up its response.

Some wonder whether the problem would have been handled more quickly if Benton Harbor's residents looked more like those in neighboring St. Joseph, who are predominantly white.

"Sometimes you just have to call out racism, and that's what it feels like," said Ambie Bell, helping distribute water to residents.

There are millions of aging underground lead lines connecting buildings to water mains across the country, mostly in the Midwest but also scattered across other states like New Jersey and Massachusetts. The old pipes can become an urgent public health risk. Newark, New Jersey, saw prolonged lead water problems that led to the rapid replacement of thousands of lead pipes. High test results in Clarksburg, West Virginia, raised alarm bells earlier this year. The word Flint is now synonymous with lead water problems.

Digging up and replacing lead service lines is costly, stressing tight local budgets. The infrastructure and reconciliation bills pending in Congress include billions to address lead line replacement that activists say could make a significant difference.

The lead water problem in Flint started when that city switched its water source to the Flint River as a temporary cost-saving move without proper treatment, corroding its lead pipes. But Benton Harbor's water source, Lake Michigan, is considered safe and many other places get their water there, City Manager Ellis Mitchell said.

"Our problem is clearly our own infrastructure," he said.

On Tuesday, the Environmental Protection Agency identified a range of violations at Benton Harbor's water facility. The federal inspection found problems so bad that the city needs to consider forfeiting ownership, the EPA said.

"The people of Benton Harbor have suffered for too long," EPA Administrator Michael Regan said in a statement.

Water systems occasionally produce high test results, but in Benton Harbor, authorities haven't been able to bring them down. The long-term fix involves replacing the roughly 2,400 pipes that may contain lead, state officials said.

The city also lacks resources. Prior governors installed emergency managers with broad decision-making authority that reduced staffing, and the city's population has declined, shrinking its tax base.

"This results in a knock-on effect of reduced technical, managerial and financial capability at the water plant due to underinvestment in staff, equipment and training," said Scott Dean, a spokesman with the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy.

After Flint's water crisis, Michigan tightened requirements for lead in drinking water in 2018, boasting it had passed the nation's most protective law. It imposed more stringent requirements for testing water for lead and mandated that old lead service lines be replaced.

Environmental groups and local activists filed a petition over Benton Harbor in September with the EPA, urging aggressive action. The Rev. Edward Pinkney, an activist whose name is on the petition, said if they hadn't filed, an aggressive official response may have taken even longer.

"We couldn't take it anymore," Pinkney said.

The Michigan House of Representatives oversight committee held a hearing last month on Benton Harbor. Republican Committee Chair Steven Johnson questioned why the recent state response to the city's lead crisis feels like it has gone "from zero to 100 miles per hour" even though the problem has persisted for years.

Michigan officials say they have taken the problem seriously.

In 2019, local officials offered Benton Harbor residents filters designed to reduce the amount of lead in drinking water. Eric Oswald, director of the state's drinking water division, told the hearing federal officials are studying the filters to make sure they work properly. They have also worked on corrosion control to reduce the amount of lead that enters the

drinking water from pipes. While lead sampling results overall are still too high, the proportion of high readings has decreased, officials said.

In addition, outreach efforts beginning in 2018 have included town halls, engagement with local press and notices to the public, officials said. Inspectors, however, knocked the city for failing to notify water customers in their water bills about the problem over a year-long period.

Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha is a pediatrician and professor at Michigan State University who raised early alarms about Flint. She gets questions from parents about whether some developmental problem could be linked to lead in the water. It is extremely difficult, however, to draw a direct link between an individual's health problem and lead in the water.

"That's why lead poising has evaded diagnosis, treatment and prevention for so long," she said, adding that exposure to lead isn't safe for children and it's too soon to predict what the long-term impact may be. Lead levels can vary by household and individuals can respond differently to exposure. The impact can depend on other factors like poverty, too, making it especially important to address the issue in city's like Benton Harbor, she said.

Marc A. Edwards, a Virginia Tech professor focused on water treatment, said the attention on Benton Harbor highlights a national problem of cities struggling with elevated lead levels. He said lead water crises like Flint degrade public trust in official management of water systems.

Sylvester Bownes, who wears a prosthetic on his right leg, said he has consumed bottled water for years because he doesn't trust Benton Harbor's water.

Pushing a makeshift cart filled with several cases of bottled water a half-mile to his home, he said a water main rupture had temporarily shut off the public water supply, so with no running water, he not only needed bottled water for drinking, but for basic needs like filling his toilets.

"Water is everything," Bownes said. "It's like gold."

Residents who are homebound can call a help line to get water delivered, but Bownes said the process takes too long and isn't reliable. State officials said hundreds of people have been added to a list for weekly deliveries. If there are problems, residents should report them, they said.

Mitchell, the city manager, said last month that customers are being billed for water that authorities say can still be used for tasks like laundry and washing dishes. He said the city is looking into whether "there's some sort of relief we can get on that."

At the Boys & Girls Club water giveaway volunteers handed out nearly 2,200 cases by noon.

Nelson, who has 12- and 14-year-old daughters and a 5-year-old son, said preparing dinner can take 15 to 20 water bottles. "Hopefully they get it fixed soon," she said.

Greg Johnson, who was the first to pull up at about 8:15 a.m., said he arrived early so his family's supplies would be replenished for his daughters, ages 8 and 11.

"It takes two cases in the morning to get them ready for school," he said. "They've got to get washed up and all that. It's kinda hectic."

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