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NWI Times - Many who call Calumet home lament dire turn of events

Left in harm's way: Generations exposed to lead

TIMELINE: A look at East Chicago's early days, development

Post Tribune - Officials: Lead in water from aging service lines

http://www.nwitimes.com/news/special-section/ec-lead/many-who-call-calumet-home-lament-dire-turn-of-events/article_a6976d93-cdc3-51c0-b0c6-59b34a76507e.html

Many who call Calumet home lament dire turn of events

From the Times coverage of high lead levels at West Calumet series

- Lauren Cross lauren.cross@nwi.com, 219-933-3206 *Flipping through history books about East Chicago, you'll find records of how an area — once nothing more than a swampy wasteland — in the early 20thcentury boomed into a city synonymous with heavy industry and the roar of manufacturing plants.*

What you won't find there are the memories of families who lived in the shadows of the smokestacks, and of those who still call East Chicago home. You won't find these in the history books, because these stories are still being written.

'Raised on the lead'

When Garfield School burned down in January 1956, students were relocated to an empty office building on the former lead smelter Eagle Pitcher property.

Sherry Hunter, 68, was one of them.

"When I was out here, we knew about the lead. We didn't know how bad it was, but we lived here and was raised on the lead," she said.

The lifelong East Chicago resident and community activist grew up near the corner of 151st Street and Melville Avenue — the USS Lead site right in her backyard.

She and her friends used to play in the park not too far from the lead plant property.

“We used to tease this old man … who worked at the lead plant. He used to cross by us on his way home down Melville. We called him 'Stinky Stout.' His name was Stout. He smelled like the lead plant … like steel, like metal. His breath, his body. Everything.”

For years, Hunter’s grandfather worked at Harbison-Walker, a refractory plant at 4343 Kennedy Ave. that once supplied the steel mills with silica fire brick, according to the Calumet Region Historical Guide.

"As far as the men would go, they would work in the mills and the lead plants," Hunter said. "They didn't know about the dangers of the lead."

'This is home'

Blighted, vacant lots are littered throughout the city's Calumet neighborhood these days, save for the white house near the corner of 150th Street and McCook Avenue. Bryon "Duke" Florence calls it home.

“This has always been home to me, other than when I was in college,” he said. “I moved from (zone) 2 to 3, but basically this has been my home … This is home. I grew up here. Born in 1951. When I left the hospital, I came here."

Anchored in childhood memories are the factories that towered on all sides of the neighborhood, the billowing smoke dominating the city sky.

Two once long-forgotten and defunct nearby factories, USS Lead and Eagle Picher, the latter also known as Anaconda Lead Products, have been thrust back into the spotlight with this summer's discovery of dangerously high lead and arsenic levels in the soil.

“Eagle Picher started all the way down to 151st all the way down to where Carrie Gosch is now. That was the factory. The cast iron fence out there now, that’s the original boundaries. We used to play, dig underneath the fence there," Florence said.

"We’d go inside the buildings and pop open the bags. We would run through the powder after we bust open the bags, not knowing what it was. And we played in it.”

At times of high production, the city had a distinct metallic smell, Florence said.

“It was a metal smell, but it was something we were used to. They would emit smoke certain times during the day; it was like fog coming in," Florence said. "Here again, we had no knowledge. EPA wasn’t even around then.”

'We were kids. We didn't know.'

Never pausing to wonder if the soil they were playing in was contaminated with toxins, childhood friends Mary Irizarry and Maritza Lopez made the city’s industrial landscape their playground in the 1970s.

“We were kids. We didn’t know,” said Lopez, now 53.

After living for years in the Calumet neighborhood, Irizarry moved to East Chicago’s Harbor section. But her parents — ages 85 and 90 — remain in her childhood home on Euclid Avenue.

The DuPont facility, which manufactured lead arsenate insecticide from 1910 to 1949, operated for years just blocks southwest of the Calumet neighborhood. Sneaking onto the land long after the facility shut down was “something we did,” Irizarry said.

“I remember taking cardboard boxes and sliding down the gravel mountains. We played King of the Hill on them,” Irizarry said. “We were kids in the '70s … We were outside in the summertime from the time we woke up until the street lights came on.”

Lopez said her family moved to East Chicago when she was 6 months old. They lived in the 4800 block of Grasselli Avenue before moving into her current house on Euclid Avenue.

These days, Lopez — who suffers from a long list of ailments — said she questions if toxic soil is the culprit behind her illnesses, and many of her neighbors' illnesses.

"(My neighbor's) husband just passed away from cancer in February. Liver cancer. Same thing like my mom. Across the alley from her, (another neighbor) … same type of liver cancer. She, herself, has colon cancer," Lopez said.

"The lady at the end of the block died of colon cancer. The lady two doors down from me … she has breast cancer. I have breast cancer. I'm anemic. I have very severe brittle bones."

'This corner has been good to me'

Greg Blosky, 62, switched on his mother's old projector — bringing to life a much younger version of himself that illuminates a large screen in his darkened living room.

"I'm maybe 5 or 6 years old here," Blosky said.

In the photo, it's a bright, sunny day and Blosky is sitting on a playground slide in EJ&E Park — a tiny, sandy lot just west of the old E.B. Lanman & Sons property at 151st and McCook.

Farther west and north of EJ&E Park was the Anaconda Lead Products facility. Grasselli Chemical Co. was situated just over the railroad tracks to the east. And to the south was USS Lead. On the corner of 151st and Alexander Avenue was Blosky's home.

"I remember riding around town on bikes with my mother. We would see all the (industrial) buildings. We just rode around together," he said.

Growing up playing in the shadow of smokestacks and factories, Blosky, now 62, speaks of East Chicago like he would an old friend.

"Some people are blessed with having a big family around them, a support group, and I was not one of them. I sort of look at the city, not so much as my family, but an area that shaped who I am today," he said. "This corner has been good to me."

'We didn't ask for this'

Wearing a black T-shirt that read, "Attention. Calumet Lives Matter," 29-year-old Nayesa Walker was stopped by a stranger this past September. She and her family had been staying at a hotel while the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency deep-cleaned her West Calumet apartment unit following the discovery of lead and arsenic in the soil.

The stranger handed her $50.

"I said, 'What is this for?'" Walker said. "And she said, 'I couldn't help but read your shirt and I asked the lady at the front desk what was going on.' She told me lunch was on her today."

It was a rare, bright moment for Walker, who learned this summer that she — along with 1,000 other residents — would be forced to relocate from the West Calumet complex due to the toxic soil.

Walker's grandmother, who died in 2010, was one of the first to move into the housing complex after it was built in 1972 on the former lead smelter, Anaconda Lead Products, she said. Now, Walker lives there with her three children — ages 7, 4, and 3.

"I don't want to leave. I'm comfortable here. To see it be torn down, it's hard. I can't ever return home," she said.

Walker said she has difficulty trusting the very agencies — local, state and federal — that are supposed to be there to protect her and provide her safe housing.

"Somebody knew something, but nobody did nothing," Walker said. "What did we do that was so bad? We didn't ask for this. We didn't ask for any of this to happen."

http://www.nwitimes.com/news/local/lake/officials-lead-in-water-from-aging-service-lines/article_d9c296ee-17cb-5c5c-a158-d8b9c0b2c122.html

Officials: Lead in water from aging service lines

- Sarah Reese sarah.reese@nwi.com, (219) 933-3351

EAST CHICAGO — The city's director of operations told residents that lead the EPA recently discovered in the drinking water at 18 homes in the USS Lead Superfund site came from service lines just outside or even inside homes, and that the findings highlight a nationwide problem.

Greg Crowley said the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency found the lead after testing water at multiple points inside homes or leading up to homes, but that water coming from the city's water mains did not have lead in it.

The federal government banned lead and lead solder in piping in 1986, and brass and chrome-plated faucets were permitted to contain up to 8 percent lead until 1996, he said.

Much of the housing in East Chicago predates those regulatory changes, and homes likely still have at-risk piping.

"We have a lot of legacy issues that we're still dealing with in terms of the quality and the condition of the piping in our overall infrastructure," Crowley said.

EPA found the lead in drinking water after testing 34 homes, a spokesman said. The testing was done before the agency began excavating lead- and arsenic-contaminated soil and is part of a pilot program to determine whether digging might cause lead particles from old pipes to enter the water supply.

Mayor Anthony Copeland said the city has a program in place to split the cost with residents of check valves to prevent sewage backups. Officials are considering a similar program to help residents obtain water filters, he said.

Copeland said he's also asked Gov. Mike Pence for an emergency declaration to help bring in more federal funding, and the city is still encouraging parents to have their children tested for lead and then return for confirmatory testing.

Blood testing is vital, because the city needs the data to show there is a problem when it seeks funding, he said.

Crowley said East Chicago pulls its drinking water from Lake Michigan and filters it at two different plants: one built in the 1960s and a second that came online in 2012 but initially was hampered by technological problems.

Crowley said one of his priorities in the past four years on the job has been to move toward using the new plant as the city's only source of drinking water. Testing has been done to bring the new plant fully online, but the testing has not affected the quality of the city's water, he said.

The city's water quality is "excellent" and complies with EPA standards, he said.

"The issue with regard to lead contamination is a separate issue altogether," Crowley said of the city's water filtration.

East Chicago, unlike Flint, Michigan, treats its water with phosphate to inhibit lead leaching or corrosion in pipes, he said.

The city has been treating its water with phosphate since 1991, when the EPA implemented its lead and copper rule. East Chicago is working with EPA officials to ensure the level of phosphate it's adding is optimal, he said.

"The city tests daily," he said. "We've been doing that for the last two decades."

Residents can check the water department's website for a presentation Crowley gave with tips on how to check for in-home lead service lines and what type of water filters to buy.

http://www.nwitimes.com/news/local/lake/left-in-harm-s-way-generations-exposed-to-lead/article_a55e4462-b2ef-5333-b12a-985b1e2c2130.html

Left in harm's way: Generations exposed to lead

From the Times coverage of high lead levels at West Calumet series

- Lauren Cross lauren.cross@nwi.com, 219-933-3206

EAST CHICAGO — Long before Flint, Michigan, thrust its own lead poisoning crisis into the national spotlight, generations of East Chicago children were exposed to toxic soil, experiencing blood lead levels at higher rates than children in Flint.

From 2005 to 2015, children living in the census tract that contains the lead-tainted West Calumet Housing Complex were twice as likely to have an elevated blood lead level than if they lived elsewhere in the city.

In all, about 22 percent of children younger than age 7 in that census tract registered at elevated levels, Indiana State Department of Health preliminary data show.

Nationally, about 1.9 percent of children are estimated to have elevated blood levels above 5 micrograms per deciliter, largely due to lead-based paint found in older homes. About half a million U.S. children are estimated to be affected.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2012 reduced its threshold for action in lead poisoning cases to 5 micrograms per deciliter from 10, which is a stronger standard.

Studies show that even at low levels, lead can have lifelong negative effects on children's academic ability, with evidence suggesting it can lead to lower IQ points, hyperactivity and behavior problems.

Average percentage of kids tested that had elevated blood levels over 2005-2015: Green: 0-5% | Blue: 6-9% | Gray: 10-15% | Orange: 16-20% | Red: More than 20%

State health department spokesman Matthew Scotten said in an email that historical data for East Chicago do not provide "an accurate reflection of the number of individuals with elevated blood lead levels," because the data not only includes venous blood draws (called "confirmed" results, because they are deemed more accurate) but also initial screenings, false positives and unknown sample types.

Scotten told The Times the department could not break down the data further to determine the number of confirmed results. The Times had requested the data and such a breakdown.

The Times sent a public records request on Sept. 6 to the East Chicago Health Department to obtain local, historical blood testing data, but the department has yet to provide any data.

Soil testing in the USS Lead Superfund site — which includes West Calumet, Carrie Gosch Elementary School, and two residential areas east of the complex — began decades ago. The site was first designated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 2009. A lead smelter once operated on the western portion of the Superfund site.

This summer, lead levels as high as 91,100 parts per million — or 227 times higher than the EPA standard for cleanup of residential areas — were found in the soil at the south end of the complex.

Then last week, the EPA and the city's mayor announced the discovery of elevated lead levels in the drinking water for a number of homes in the eastern section of the Superfund site.

Since testing of residents began in July, about 5 percent — or 17 of 330 children younger than age 7 tested — registered above 5 mcg/dl with confirmatory testing, as of Dec. 6. The number does not include any tests performed by private providers.

For comparison, when Flint, Michigan, switched its water supply in 2014 to save money, the incidence rate of elevated blood lead levels in the city's children increased from 2.4 percent to 4.9 percent and 6.6 percent in neighborhoods with the largest increase in water lead levels, according a 2015 study from the American Journal of Public Health.

Not surprised

One whistle-blower at the center of the Flint lead poisoning — Virginia Tech professor Marc Edwards — said the high rates in East Chicago are "horrific," but not surprising.

"When Flint happened, I knew it was going to happen. When East Chicago happened, I was not the slightest bit surprised that the same untrustworthy, unethical scientists went in and left kids in harm's way," Edwards said.

“These are people who are our most vulnerable (children) and almost completely dependent on these agencies for their protection.”

Edwards was instrumental in uncovering a similar situation in Washington, D.C., in 2001, when D.C.'s Water and Sewer Authority changed its water treatment chemical, potentially exposing thousands of children and families to lead in the drinking supply.
But the true failure, Edwards said, arrived three years later when the federal CDC released a health assessment report, misleading the public into believing the drinking water still was safe.

A subsequent U.S. House of Representatives committee investigation found the CDC made “scientifically indefensible” claims that lead in the drinking water would not harm people in D.C.

“What I learned in D.C. is that you can’t trust your child or anyone’s child with these agencies,” Edwards said.

A false sense of security
A 1998 health assessment from the CDC's Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, called ATSDR for short, recommended soil remediation at East Chicago's USS Lead Superfund site, noting 30 children age 6 or younger were tested in July 1997 by the state health department, and 30 percent had blood lead levels of 10 micrograms per deciliter or more, which was the CDC’s threshold for action at the time.

An updated 2011 public health assessment by the same agency failed to consider hot spots in the USS Lead Superfund site. In fact, the agency concluded: "Breathing the air, drinking tap water or playing in the soil around the USS Lead site is not expected to harm people's health, as indicated by the declining blood lead levels in small children."

The agency cited a decline in blood lead levels in children in all of East Chicago between 1998 and 2008 as a reason to believe children no longer were exposed to lead in the Superfund site.

Dr. Bruce Lanphear, a leading researcher of environmental toxins and a health and science professor at Simon Frasier University in Canada, said concluding lead exposure is not a problem because of declining levels is not necessarily true.
“A fairer comparison would be to compare children in the heavily contaminated community with a national average or some other reference community,” he said.

Approximately 10 percent of children in the census tract encompassing two cleanup zones to the east of the complex had preliminary or confirmed elevated blood lead levels between 2005 and 2015. Other census tracts throughout East Chicago range from as low as 6 percent to as high as 12 percent — still well above the national average.

Over the last half-century, blood lead levels in U.S. adults and children have declined dramatically with increased regulations on industry, and bans in the 1970s on lead-based paint and leaded gasoline.

Paralleling national trends, state records show blood lead levels have decreased in East Chicago over time. However, East Chicago’s heavy industry, coupled with its high number of older homes with lead-based paint, increase the odds of a child having an elevated blood lead level.

"We don't have great surveillance data, so it's difficult to put in perspective. But if you compare that to the national average, that's pretty striking and would put East Chicago, that neighborhood, among the highest in the country," Lanphear said.
"If you don't look at neighborhood-specific areas, where the hot spots are, you are underestimating exposure in some communities."

The city's mayor earlier this year criticized the 2011 ATSDR report for not consulting with local health department officials who had collected blood lead testing data between 1991 and 2011.

Mark Johnson, regional director for ATSDR, said the agency is reviewing its 2011 report by revisiting the state health department's blood testing data and the impact of exposure.

Scotten said the state health department submits lead data regularly to the CDC but has no record of a specific data request from ATSDR.

"ISDH does not support the conclusions of the 2011 report," he said.

East Chicago not alone
A similar story is unfolding 2,000 miles west of East Chicago, in neighborhoods on the outskirts of Exide Technologies, a battery recycling facility in Vernon, California.

After Exide shut down in March 2015, to avoid federal criminal charges stemming from the emissions of dangerous pollutants, the state public health department discovered blood lead levels in children living in neighborhoods near the facility were higher than those who lived farther away.
About 3.6 percent of children younger than 6 living within one mile of the Exide facility had levels of 4.5 mcg/dl or higher, California health officials' threshold for action.

Contamination remains a major concern for families living near the site as plans for a massive cleanup are underway, said Jill Johnston, a preventive medicine professor at the University of Southern California.

The numbers in East Chicago are "extremely high," though not surprising given the placement of the housing complex on a former lead smelter, she said.

"Exide is in an industrial city, so most of the communities are, like, a half mile out," Johnston said. "We think (airborne) lead has definitely traveled that far, but these families (in California) were not sitting on top of a former lead smelter."

http://www.nwitimes.com/news/special-section/ec-lead/a-century-of-heavy-industry-transformed-east-chicago-s-calumet/article_2e8a104e-2ae9-5f42-9142-a74829c6ea85.html

NWI Times - A century of heavy industry transformed East Chicago's Calumet neighborhood

(Photo series)

http://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/post-tribune/news/ct-ptb-east-chicago-water-quality-st-1213-20161212-story.html

Officials: Lead found in water shows need for upgrades

Craig Lyons Post-Tribune

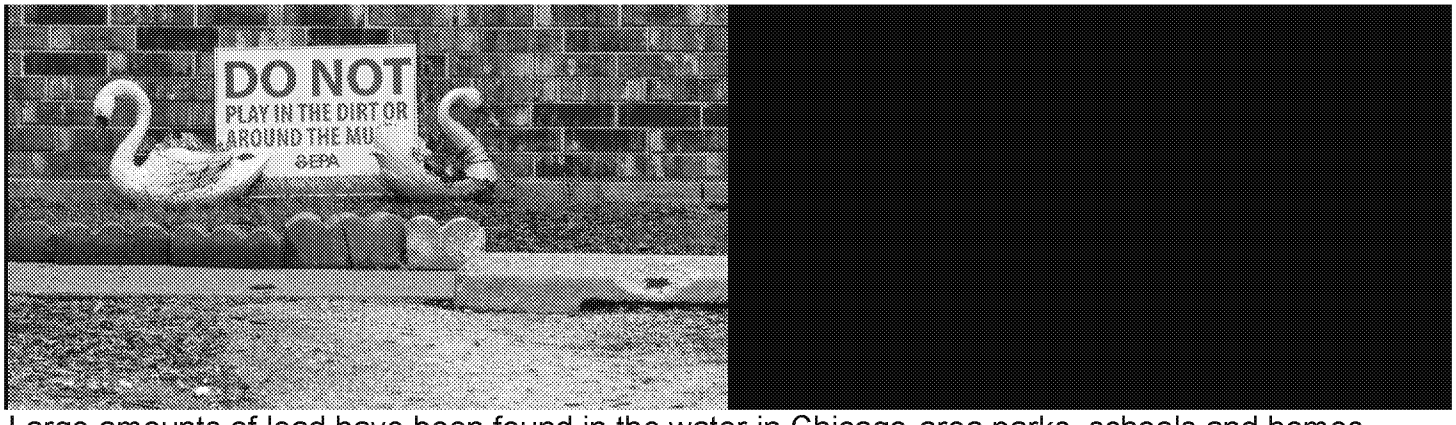
Water testing results that found elevated lead levels in the water in portions of East Chicago's Calumet neighborhood reinforce the need to upgrade utility infrastructure, city officials said Monday.

"We have a water infrastructure issue," said Greg Crowley, the city's utilities director.

East Chicago is in the same place as cities across the country with aging water infrastructure, Crowley said, but making those improvements is an expensive proposition.

A recent report by the Indiana Finance Authority found the state's water systems require $2.3 billion in immediate repairs. The report said that limited pools of federal or state dollars are available for infrastructure upgrades and those costs often fall on the rate payers.

"In the older cities in the Midwest, the need to repair aging systems is becoming a larger issue that can have public health consequences," the report said. "At the same time that many utilities are being forced to upgrade their sewer systems to improve water quality, drinking water utilities are becoming aware of the scale of the funding gap that exists to maintain their own distribution and treatment assets."



Large amounts of lead have been found in the water in Chicago-area parks, schools and homes. Even at low levels, lead can permanently damage developing brains and nervous systems of young children. Here's what you can do to protect yourself from lead exposure in drinking water. Read more here. Nov. 18, 2016.

Mayor Anthony Copeland said replacing the water infrastructure for roughly half a block can cost between $500,000 to $1 million.

Copeland said in light of the water testing done by the EPA in the Calumet neighborhood, which found elevated levels of lead in the water, he wanted to balance that information with a meeting on the state of the city's water.

The most recent water testing found roughly 8 parts per billion of lead, Crowley said, and the EPA's threshold is 15 parts per billion.

Crowley said the city's water is piped in from Lake Michigan and treated at one of two facilities. He said the lead that's found in the water is coming from aging pipes, most likely in plumbing that comes off the main lines.

It wasn't until 1986 that the use of lead pipes was banned for water infrastructure, according to Crowley, and many homes built before 1980 could have lead pipe somewhere.

"This is really more of a legacy issue," Crowley said. "What have we got to do to get the lead out? We've got a lot of it."

The EPA monitored water quality of the eastern zones of the U.S.S. Lead Superfund site during remediation work in the neighborhood, according to an announcement by the mayor, and found that 18 of the 43 homes where the water was tested exceeded the EPA's water safety threshold.

At lead-tainted Indiana housing complex, inaction and missed warnings

Copeland said, in the announcement, the city's water supply meets all state and federal quality standards. And the EPA used a pilot program to test water quality it had not used before, Copeland said.

The EPA said Friday the data from the testing have not been verified and are only preliminary.

Crowley said the EPA's testing program was designed to look at the potential impact of remediation on the water quality. He said the pilot program looked at whether movement and vibration from the excavation work was causing lead from the water infrastructure to leech into the water.

"That's what they're trying to determine," Crowley said.

Crowley said it's difficult to compare East Chicago to the situation in Flint, Mich., because the circumstances are different.

In East Chicago, the water comes from Lake Michigan, which has good quality water; the city uses phosphates to coat pipes and prevent corrosion from leeching into the water; and the water systems comply with federal and state rules.

In Flint, Crowley said the water was transitioned from Lake Huron to the Flint River, which was a more corrosive body of water; the water system did not use anything to treat the pipes; and the infrastructure was not in compliance with federal regulations.

"The concerns there were really multifaceted," Crowley said.

If residents are concerned about the presence of lead in the water, Crowley said there are precautions they can take to prevent exposure. People can consider using a certified water filter on

their taps, running the water before use to flush any sediment; and placing clean aerators on the faucet taps.

Copeland said the city has a three-tiered approach to working on the lead issues. He said that includes making sure children are tested for lead exposure; developing a cost-sharing program so homeowners can get water filters for their homes; and applying pressure to state and federal officials to give the city a disaster declaration and leverage money to help the city.

Crowley said residents can also contact the water department to get information on having their water tested.

Sincerely,

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