

Michigan governor declares state of emergency over Flint lead poisoning

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Late Tuesday, three weeks after the newly elected mayor of Flint, Michigan declared a state of emergency over the lead poisoning of the city's population, the state's governor, Rick Snyder, issued a declaration of emergency for both the city of Flint and Genesee County.

The governor's office press release reads, "By declaring a state of emergency, Snyder has made available all state resources in cooperation with local response and recovery operations. The declaration authorizes the Michigan State Police, Emergency Management and Homeland Security Division to coordinate state efforts."

Snyder stated, "The health and welfare of Flint residents is a top priority and we're committed to a coordinated approach with resources from state agencies to address all aspects of this situation." After two years of lies and direct culpability in the disaster, Snyder is engaged in intense political damage control. His declaration came the same day the US Attorney's Office revealed that it is investigating the Flint water poisoning.

Snyder made his announcement one day after the Genesee County Board of Commissioners held a meeting to discuss its approval of Flint Mayor Karen Weaver's request for a federal disaster declaration. After a presentation by medical experts from Flint's Hurley Medical Center, Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha and Dr. Lawrence Reynolds, the body endorsed Weaver's request.

With some fanfare, commissioners, including Chairman Jamie Curtis, whose first public response to Weaver's call for a state of emergency was, "It's not going to change anything. ... Nothing more can be done," signed the documents. Almost immediately after his initial negative response, Curtis changed his tune. After endorsing the paperwork that would send the declaration to Snyder to finalize, Curtis stated, "We're not going to be ignored. We're going to get the help that these people need."

The reckless and criminal decision that was made to use

the polluted Flint River as a water source was implemented close to two years ago, and during that time virtually all local and state authorities stood by the decision, generating a network of lies in response to countless complaints made by Flint citizens over the quality of their water. The Flint disaster is the direct result of austerity measures approved by both Republicans and Democrats, who have been slashing budgets and cutting funding for social programs for decades.

In her address to the county Board of Commissioners meeting on Monday, Dr. Hanna-Attisha made a strong case for an emergency declaration. She stated, "This disaster, this emergency exceeds the capacity of our city resources, of our county resources and maybe even of our state resources, and we need help."

"This is a catastrophe. We have a clearly demarcated area of exposure... It wasn't a natural disaster. It was a human-made disaster and it caused significant consequences that we will be seeing for generations to come... Our whole community has been traumatized and they need hope and they need resources. The water is not safe yet... And families don't have the help they need."

Mayor Weaver, who was elected overwhelmingly last November after a campaign run almost exclusively in opposition to incumbent Dayne Walling's callous and corrupt role during the water crisis, addressed the meeting after the signing of the county's endorsement in somewhat celebratory tones. Calling the endorsement "a victory, and... a step in the right direction," she thanked and congratulated a team of her supporters who volunteered during the water crisis.

Weaver reported that she would be seeking a meeting at the Obama White House. On January 7, she will meet with Michigan's governor to discuss the state of emergency declaration. Snyder's announcement Tuesday was designed to take the sting out of that meeting.

One of the county commissioners, Brenda Clack, spoke

several times during the proceedings about sweeping away “negativity” and going forward “together.” Despite that, in the time allotted for attendees to address the meeting, several residents expressed their anger and concerns. Speakers insisted that if and when the federal “superfund” money comes, it be used to address the lead crisis as intended.

Gladyes Williamson, who described herself as a “water warrior,” noted that water was being shipped overseas from Lake Superior in tankers, asking why that couldn’t be done for Flint. She said, “We need water. It’s not just the children.”

In her remarks to the January 4 meeting, Dr. Hanna-Attisha explained that lead is a dangerous neurotoxin, exposure to which results in a “multigenerational impact.” She added, “It creates behavior problems and a host of other medical problems. That’s why the CDC [the federal government’s Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] and the American Academy of Pediatrics have repeatedly said there is no safe level of lead.”

Hanna-Attisha continued, “So, our research showed that the lead levels in the entire city of Flint’s children doubled. In some neighborhoods—in some specific wards—children with elevated lead levels actually tripled. One ward went from 5 percent up to 15 percent. This was published a couple of weeks ago in the *American Journal of Public Health*.

“Our research completely underestimates the risk because we screen children for lead at the ages of one and two. However, children who are exposed to lead in water are much younger—in utero, fetuses, as well as babies on formula. And the half-life [the time required for the concentration of a substance in the body to decrease by half] of lead in human blood is only about thirty days, and then it gets excreted. But once it’s in your system, it already creates toxicity.

“So, a baby’s blood level could have peaked at 3 months or 4 months or 5 months and when we check that baby at one year or two years, that level would have [misleadingly] come down.

“Now we assume we have an entire population which has been exposed. So, anybody who drinks this water, anybody who cooks with this water... cooking actually concentrates the lead in your food. So, if you’re making your kids macaroni and cheese, that lead actually gets concentrated in the food.”

Genesee County Sheriff Robert Pickell noted that there were 15,000 drinking water service lines made of lead in Flint. To replace them, he estimated, would cost \$45

million.

At Monday’s meeting, WSWs reporters interviewed Keri Webber, a Flint resident, about her experiences: “I’m 45. Ever since I was a child, they said you don’t swim in that water. Now they tell us it’s okay to drink?”

Webber’s 45-year-old husband lost vision in one eye due to elevated blood pressure resulting from lead poisoning. Her daughter, who is about to turn 16, has also been diagnosed with lead poisoning, as well as with kidney disease.

“My husband was 44. My daughter was 15. I don’t think they were eating paint chips.

“No one believed us here because we’re from Flint. We’re poor. We’re uneducated. But we were right about the water.”

Keri’s neighbors have a one-year-old and a three-year-old diagnosed with lead poisoning. They did not drink the water, but maybe they bathed in it or cooked with it, she speculated.

She expressed anger over her water bills. Residents still have to pay their water bills and their rates are eight times higher than the national average, she explained. Her current monthly bill is \$240.

Shane Hofey, who was standing nearby, interjected, “You have to pay for your own poisoning.”

WSWS reporters spoke to Dr. Hanna-Attisha on her way out about the lack of filters for the population. She said there must be a door-to-door effort to deliver and install the items. “The county has given away just one-third of the filters,” she said.

She explained that there were only 14,000 filters for the population. “In our work, we visited 54 families with children and none of them had filters.”



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