

Flint inmates forced to use contaminated water

Sheila Brehm
12 February 2016

A recently released prisoner revealed that hundreds of his fellow inmates in Flint, Michigan's Genesee County Jail were lied to about lead-poisoned water and told it was safe. They had no option other than drinking the tainted tap water. With the exception of two very brief episodes of bottled water distribution—in October 2015 and again in January 2016—the inmates, including pregnant women, have been drinking, washing and consuming food prepared from contaminated water for nearly two years.

The news about the inhumane treatment of prisoners was brought to light when Jody Cramer, a former inmate and Flint resident, was released after serving a two-month sentence. He told his story to Pacifica Radio news program "Democracy Now."

In April 2014, the city switched its water source to the polluted and corrosive Flint River, without treating the water with corrosion controls, causing lead to leach from pipes. After the city made the switch, residents complained about the smell, color and taste of their tap water, to no avail.

The truth about the poisoned water was deliberately concealed from Flint residents by city, state and national officials. Evidence is now emerging almost on a daily basis that the authorities knew about the health dangers and yet refused to warn the public.

Due to the efforts of a Flint mother whose child was diagnosed with lead poisoning and who refused to believe the lies of water authorities that the city's water complied with federal safe drinking water standards, water expert Dr. Marc Edwards of Virginia Tech University was alerted. Edwards led the team that then carried out extensive testing of Flint's water in August-September 2015. The speed and scope of the study was possible only because of the close-knit network of Flint citizens established through months of protests against

the foul water and the lies of authorities. On September 29, Flint pediatrician Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha gave a press conference to publicize a report showing that a dramatic increase in high lead levels in children corresponded to the switch to Flint River water.

It wasn't until October 2015 that Genesee County declared a public health emergency. On October 8, Michigan governor Rick Snyder, after finally admitting that the use of Flint River water may have been "a mistake," ordered the switch back to Detroit water. After the caustic, untreated water had flowed through the city's pipes for 17 months, however, the switch back did not make the city's water safe to drink. Lead was still leaching into the water from the damaged system of pipes.

In December, newly elected mayor Karen Weaver declared a state of emergency in Flint over the water crisis. In January, Genesee County, then the state of Michigan, and finally, US President Obama followed suit with similar declarations.

Yet, through all this, the city's inmates were kept in the dark.

Jody Cramer reported that on January 23, the jail switched to bottled water, but five days later, Genesee County Sheriff Robert Pickell claimed a water-quality test showed the water was safe.

While inside Genesee County Jail, Cramer worked in the kitchen and helped distribute food and, more recently, bottles of water to other inmates. He said he cooked and cleaned with the lead-laced water, the same water used in showers by other inmates, until January 23, when bottled water was handed out for only five days.

Pregnant women were among the hundreds of inmates drinking the contaminated water for months, according to Cramer. Ingesting lead while pregnant can

cause miscarriages, brain damage, or other permanent damages to the newborn's nervous system or kidneys.

"Many inmates made complaints due to the fact that the deputies did not drink from the faucets," Cramer said. "We were consistently told the water was good. In jail, we were drinking from the taps. Our food was being made from the taps.

"Prior to this, they had already started handing out bottles of water when this first broke in October. And then they stopped, saying that their water was good. Many inmates made complaints due to the fact that the deputies all carried bottled water. And on that same token, we were consistently told that the water in the jail was good."

When Cramer called home to speak to his family, his mother told him the water was not okay. She called the jail repeatedly and was told the facility was using a filtration system.

In October, when Sheriff Pickell was notified about the water emergency, he arranged for bottled water for the prisoners at the jail but told ABC news at the time, "The expense was pretty great because we have over 600 inmates. It cost \$4,800 for the bottled water that lasted five days."

Pickell also complained that they had to buy dried food for the inmates because they couldn't use the water to cook. He had testing done by the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), he reported.

According to Pickell, the results showed only trace levels of lead in the water, except for one faucet that tested very high in the jail's medical room. A subsequent test was run by an independent lab that found only trace levels in the medical room's faucet.

The Genesee County Health Department said that the original high reading by the DEQ might be a result of a faucet screen trapping lead particles. Pickell had the screen removed and said as long as the lead did not exceed trace levels, the jail would continue to use tap water.

Pickell has been sheriff since 1999. His biography states he was a top interrogator and covert agent for the CIA. He insists that water in the jail has been tested safe. However, after Cramer's interview was broadcast, he later said the jail would distribute bottled water to the inmates. Cramer said that when he was delivering bottled water to other inmates, he was instructed to give just two 12-ounce bottles to each inmate. That is far

less than half the daily recommended amount of drinking water for both men and women.

Jody Cramer also reported that deputies were passing out water filtration systems while doing warrant sweeps—seeking to arrest people with outstanding warrants. "If you had warrants—they did a warrant sweep while they did that, so they tricked you. If you answered your door, and they would say, 'Hey, how are you doing, Mr. Cramer?' If I responded, then I just confirmed that I'm me. 'Well, here's your water filtration system. By the way, you have a warrant for your arrest.' People were saying that's how they got arrested."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact