

”I’m tired of being peaceful. I’m tired of being nice”

Flint residents protest two years of ongoing water crisis

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Flint, Michigan residents marked the second anniversary of the switch from the Detroit water system to the corrosive Flint River with a rally and news conference in front of the Flint City Hall on April 25. Both events expressed the frustration and anger of residents to the indifference, disdain and absence of assistance from all levels of government.

While vast resources are urgently needed to address the ongoing effects of lead poisoning, both the state and federal government are moving to wash their hands of responsibility for assisting the population and rebuilding infrastructure. Even the supplying of bottled water and filters will not continue past the month of August. In mid-April, Professor Marc Edwards and the Flint Water Study team at Virginia Tech announced that testing demonstrates that Flint’s water remains unsafe to drink.

When the Obama administration’s limited declaration of an emergency was given a four-month extension in April, Elizabeth Zimmerman, associate administrator for FEMA’s Office of Response and Recovery, made it absolutely clear: “No further extensions will be granted.” State emergency resources will also end at the same time.

The rally of over 100 residents was opened by Desiree Duell, a young mother whose child is suffering from lead poisoning, and Nakiya Wakes, who miscarried her twins last year. Special assistance for children with lead poisoning was ended for Wakes’ seven-year-old son because the cutoff age is six. Although water testing has shown some improvement, lead continues to leach into tap water. The water in Wakes’ home was recently tested and shows high levels of lead and other contaminants.

The demands of the rally organizers included disaster relief status from the federal government to replace all lead pipes, Medicare coverage for all regardless of age to confront the public health disaster and an end to the Emergency Manager system.

While many of those participating in and organizing the rally were ordinary Flint residents, some of the groups

involved have connections to the Democratic Party—which, no less than the Republicans, was involved in the decision to switch to the Flint River and the subsequent cover-up of the consequences.

Invited to speak was Democratic Mayor Karen Weaver. She made perfunctory remarks to the rally. “We’re not going to quiet down until we get new pipes,” she said, without explaining how that would be done or why only 33 pipes have been installed so far.

Weaver was brought into office last November amidst a wave of opposition to Mayor Dayne Walling, also a Democrat, for his role in defending the use of Flint River water. State and local officials gave the go-ahead, and Walling flipped the switch that set into motion the present catastrophe.

Florisa Fowler spoke as a representative of the Flint Water Class Action Group, which was founded in September 2014. “Each one of us has a horrific story, and I will not go into that today. But why are we even here to mark a two-year anniversary—without resolution? We should have seen major changes by now, not only at a city level, but with state and federal help. I will not stop speaking out. Safe and affordable water is a basic human right we cannot go without every day.”

Many workers are concluding that the numerous hearings in Washington, Lansing and Flint enabled the Democrats and Republicans to feign outrage, carry out grandstanding and finger pointing without committing them to any substantial funding for the Flint population.

The city of 100,000, only 70 miles north of Detroit, was inundated by the national and international press during the US Democratic presidential debate held in Flint between Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders, only to be abandoned since.

Beth Stephens addressed the rally, “My concern is what happens after the notoriety dies down? What happens to Flint after we are not making nationwide news? Are we

going to get help? This is supposed to be the land of the free and the home of the brave, but communist countries have free medical, free college education. We don't have that for our people."

Melissa Mays, one of the mothers who was instrumental in bringing the Flint water crisis to the attention of the public, referred to the 12 deaths from Legionnaires' disease. "Two years ago, lives were lost. Uneducated politicians and unelected dictators made the decision that we weren't worth safe, clean water. We have the highest [water] rates in the nation, but that wasn't enough.

Referring to an email from Susan Hedman, the former director of EPA's Region 5, Mays said, "Flint wasn't a community that was 'worth going out on a limb for'.

"So, our job is to prove them wrong. Our job is to show them we are not going sit down and take this anymore. And you know what, I have been peaceful. I have tried to fight this in the courts, in the labs doing all the things to prove that the water was poisoned. We got that proof. The water is poisoned. And two years later it is getting worse. You all know about the family that had 22,900 ppb of lead, right? So, how is it getting better? It's not.

"I watched my 13-year-old son damn near pass out today from blood tests looking for bacteria and immune disorders. He's 13. So, I am reaching my breaking point. I'm tired of being peaceful. I'm tired of being nice. They're not listening."

Many other residents went to the podium to tell their stories. Aaron Stinson, 39, made national news in February when Genesee County Health Department officials told him a test showed he had the highest blood lead levels of any adult that had been tested in the county to date.

Stinson's results revealed that he had blood lead levels of 27 micrograms per deciliter of blood (27 ug/dl), five times the level considered toxic. When he was retested in March, his lead level of 19.1 was still very high. Excessive sweating, fatigue and severe headaches are just a handful of symptoms he experiences.

Stinson told the crowd, "The health care system in the United States is a real issue. We turn to our health care professionals because we want to be healthy. Since I have been dealing with this, I am not getting help. In fact when I spoke to one doctor, and I gave my name and information, this is what happened." Stinson then turned his back to the audience to demonstrate how he is treated with indifference at the doctor's office. "That's the reality of the lead situation."

A news conference led by LeeAnne Walters, held earlier in the afternoon, also expressed the frustration of residents with the utter lack of any assistance. Walters is one of the mothers who contacted Virginia Tech's Marc Edwards. The

mother of four was ignored and scorned when she tried to expose dangerous levels of lead in the water in Flint until tests done by Edwards proved her correct.

She and others have started the Community Development Organization (CDO), a nonprofit intended to help area residents. The organizers hope to raise \$1 million for their efforts.

Keri Webber, one of the members of the CDO board, explained, "My husband had a stroke in his eye from the lead poisoning. We currently have thousands of dollars in medical bills.

"I have taken this to everyone I can and there is no help. I was told to seek out my federal congress people and see if they could help me. Until then we are on the hook for all of his medical bills. We owe about \$8,500. We also have a 21-year-old daughter that had Legionella.

"I have said all along, if this is one family of four, what about all of the other 99,999 people? And we have talked to other residents who are right where we are. Husbands that can't work any more, that are sick, that are losing their homes. There is so much. It's horrible. And then for the state to tell me, 'We wish you the best of luck. We can't help you.'"

The Flint water crisis has exposed a national catastrophe. Nearly every day reports emerge of lead in drinking water. This week, lead levels found in two Tacoma, Washington elementary schools were as high as 2,330 parts per billion (ppb). That is more than 150 times the federal Environmental Protection Agency's threshold for action. The EPA classifies water with more than 5,000 ppb as hazardous waste. What is even more outrageous is that the testing was done a year ago, but not disclosed until Monday. As in the Flint water crisis, every effort is made to conceal the life-and-death implications of decaying infrastructure.

Both the Democratic and Republican parties provide as little as possible to address a crisis for which they are responsible. Moreover, the claim that there is no money to replace the lead pipes and provide needed health care is a lie as unlimited resources are made available to bail out the banks and finance the US war machine.



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