Michigan attorney general charges six more state officials in Flint water crisis

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Three employees each of two state departments were officially added to the list of defendants to face prosecution by Michigan's attorney general's office over wrongdoings in the Flint water crisis. At a Flint press conference yesterday, Attorney General Bill Schuette made the announcement after making a promotional pitch for the existence of equality under the law in Michigan.

"The families of Flint will not be forgotten. We will provide the justice they deserve. And in Michigan, the system is not rigged," Schuette proclaimed, adding for effect, "There is one system of justice. It applies to everybody. Equally. No matter who you are. Period."

Each of the newly announced defendants faces a combination of felony and misdemeanor charges which could mean prison sentences of 11 years, on average. All six officials consciously covered up the health dangers posed by Flint water after the city was switched from a safe water source to the toxic Flint River.

One of the more notorious of those charged yesterday was Michigan Department of Environmental Quality's (MDEQ) former Office of Drinking Water and Municipal Assistance Division chief Liane Shekter Smith, who was fired in February. In a meeting last August, she bragged to residents LeeAnne Walters and Melissa Mays, whose families had both been severely damaged by lead poisoning, that Miguel Del Toral, a water expert from Region 5 of the federal Environmental Protection Agency, who was seeking to expose the real situation with the water, had "been handled."

Adam Rosenthal, an MDEQ water quality analyst, faces 14 years for his role in falsifying the sampling of Flint's water for lead. Rosenthal directed Mike Glasgow, former water plant manager, to find "good" samples in order to prove Flint's water was in compliance. Glasgow, who was indicted last April, entered a plea of "no contest" and is cooperating with the investigation.

Patrick Cook, of the MDEQ environmental health programs unit, was indicted for interfering with the proper sampling of Flint water.

From the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS), three other employees were indicted: Nancy Peeler, director of the program for maternal, infant and early childhood home visiting; Robert Scott, data manager for the healthy homes and lead prevention program; and Corrine Miller, former director of the bureau of epidemiology and state epidemiologist.

The MDHHS defendants were charged with burying an internal report showing increased blood-lead levels in Flint children and creating a falsified report.

These six indictments bring the number of criminal indictments to nine, including the indictments of Glasgow and former MDEQ officials Stephen Busch, who was a district supervisor in the MDEQ Office of Drinking Water and Municipal Assistance, and Michael Prysby, a former MDEQ district engineer.

In response to a question from the press, Schuette professed not to understand the motivations of those charged beyond "part arrogance, part viewing people in Flint as expendable" and handed the question over to Special Counsel Todd Flood. He claimed to have a good idea, but he wouldn't "get into that right now."

Another question was raised about whether Governor Rick Snyder would be indicted. That question was fielded by Chief Investigator Andy Arena, former FBI Detroit chief, who explained that in his history of investigating organized crime, "you don't start at the top," but have to work upward through the channels.

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Schuette and his team insisted that “Nobody’s off the table” in pursuit of the truth.

That remains to be seen. The forcing of Flint off its longstanding source of safe water was a result of the bankruptcy operation in Detroit. This was carried out by both Democrats and Republicans and had the full endorsement of the Obama administration. The crimes committed by officials being prosecuted were in line with the narrative that Flint’s water was safe to drink, no matter how much the people of Flint protested and complained, and even died, over the toxic water being pumped into homes and hospitals from the Flint River.

The breaking up of the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department was done to override the safeguards to both employees and ratepayers in the city charter and prepare for privatization of one of the largest water systems in the country. Losing its largest customer—the city of Flint—played into the scheme to “monetize” the city’s assets.

But the account that Detroit mayor Mike Duggan presented to the Democratic convention in Philadelphia the day before Schuette’s latest indictments—that the bankruptcy in Detroit gave the city new opportunities to bring in new decent-paying jobs and encourage vibrant growth and prosperity—is of the same cloth as that of the corrupt state officials being charged yesterday.

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