Pittsburgh residents demand their water be tested for lead

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Water authorities in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania are conducting political damage control over the city's escalating water crisis. Thousands of residents are demanding that their water be tested for lead after a report from July indicated that 43 of the 100 homes tested have dangerously high levels of lead in their water.

On September 12, Bernard Lindstrom, a former Colonel in the Army Corps of Engineers, became the latest in a string of interim directors of the Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority (PWSA). His main focus, as he explained to reporters, was to rebuild public trust in the water system. Easier said than done. The department is woefully incapable of meeting demands of residents to test their water.

It is as yet to be determined how long toxic water has been piped into the homes of Pittsburgh residents. After the Flint water crisis made headlines over the past year, and public consciousness about the health implications of lead poisoning expanded, hundreds of local residents demanded that authorities test the water in their homes.

Concern was aggravated with revelations that the PWSA had not been conducting proper tests for lead.

Lead in drinking water is especially dangerous for young children and infants, which can cause lower IQ, developmental and behavioral problems, as well as future growth and immunological problems. There is no safe level of lead exposure, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The results of the PWSA testing released in July showed that 17 percent of tested homes had lead levels above 15 parts per billion (ppb), the "action level" designated by the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). One home tested had 88 ppb, or nearly six times the EPA action level. Other homes had levels from 30 to 60 ppb.

Prior to last summer's testing, the most recent tests available were from 2013. Those tests showed that levels were at 14.7 ppb—just below the EPA action level. However, PWSA testing was not done according to EPA or state regulations.

In fact, since 2001, PWSA officials have been negligent in their routine responsibility to test for lead in water. State law requires the agency to test just 50 homes every three years in lead prone areas. The EPA also mandates testing for lead and copper levels in drinking water.

In 2004, the PWSA tested just 22 at-risk homes, and in 2010, just 24. The rest were low-risk homes. In 2012, local news station KTAE found that 40 out of the 50 tests were done at the homes of PWSA employees comprising just two neighborhoods.

The *Guardian* reported earlier this month that, "Unlike in Flint, Michigan, where sudden changes in water chemistry caused a spike, lead levels in Pittsburgh's tap water rose steadily for 12 years, alongside cancer-causing chemicals from fracking waste."

The PWSA has a sordid history of bureaucratic corruption. A performance review of the authority issued in July, 2009 by Resource Development & Management, charged the PWSA with over-reliance on outside contractors, excess turnover of management, lack of attention to maintaining the system and a lack of accountability at all levels.

Since then, in 2012, the PWSA hired the French-based water corporation Veolia—the same company being sued in Michigan for its role in obscuring lead levels in Flint—to manage the city's water system. Jim Good, then a Veolia employee, was later hired as director of the PWSA in May, 2015, at a salary of $240,000 a year.

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Good abruptly resigned last March amid a scandal over PWSA billing operations. More than 50,000 residents received massive bills, many in the thousands of dollars, after a new metering system, at a cost of millions of dollars, went months, and sometimes years, sending inaccurate meter readings.

Many residents did not receive bills for months, and in some cases years, only to have to pay or face water shutoff. One resident was sent a shutoff notice for a bill of just $107. Despite the increasing health issues emerging in Pittsburgh's water system, water bills in general have gone up by nearly 50 percent.

In 2010, the water supply in Pittsburgh and surrounding communities faced a spike in cancer-causing chemicals as a result of the dumping of fracking wastewater into the Allegheny river from which Pittsburgh drinking water is drawn. Fracking wastewater contains hundreds of harmful chemicals, including many salts, and metals such as barium.

Cancer-causing trihalomethanes were formed when chlorine was added to water to kill bacteria and reacted with the salts contained in fracking wastewater. In an attempt to reduce the carcinogens in the drinking water the PWSA reduced the amount of chlorine rather than demand that hydro-fracturing operations stop dumping their wastewater into the city's water supply. The EPA banned the disposal of wastewater from hydraulic fracturing operations at public sewer plants only in June of this year.

The PWSA, under Veolia's tenure, which ended in 2015, twice switched the chemical it uses to reduce lead in drinking water without informing state authorities. In July, the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) accused the PWSA of making unauthorized changes in corrosion control chemicals.

Before ending its contract Veolia took a $4.9 million performance improvement payment in addition to monthly payments of between $90,000 to $120,000.

The Pittsburgh Water and Sewage Authority was formed 20 years ago as a form of privatization of the city's water system, in which authority executives, private contractors and Wall Street speculators reaped huge payouts and profits.

In 2008, the PWSA took out a $400 million variable rate bond in which lawyers, brokers and bankers made millions to broker the deal. The interest rate on the bonds shot up, as the authority is now spending over 44 percent of its operating budget on interest and principal payments.

While financiers and investors raked in millions from the dirty deals made over the Pittsburgh water system, the population has suffered from the lack of spending on infrastructure. In 2011, four people, including a mother and her three children, drowned when clogged storm drainage pipes backed up, flooding busy roads, submerging automobiles and neighborhoods.

Today, while the PWSA claims that the lead-in-water problem is due to the many lead service lines (LSLs) that deliver water to individual homes, no serious proposal has been put forward to replace them. The recent test results trigger regulatory action requiring that the PWSA replace 7 percent of the LSLs each year. At approximately $5,000 per home, costs would be enormous, and there are no state or federal funds available to help cover the costs.

A spokesman for Pennsylvania's Department of Environmental Protection, John Poister, told the press last month that Pittsburgh can't even identify the LSLs: "Right now, they cannot tell us where all their lead distribution lines are. Once they know that, we'll have a better handle on who and how many customers are affected."

Last week, it was revealed that 75 percent of the city's water line records date from before 1950 and are on paper. PWSA director of engineering Bob Weimar said, "There are some 225,000 pieces of paper we need to look at," requiring digitization before the oldest and most hazardous lines can be located.

Poister of the DEP stated bluntly: "We don't have a solution at this point for how to replace the service lines."

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