

# Michigan health director named in latest round of charges over Flint water crisis

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Michigan Attorney General Bill Schuette filed charges of involuntary manslaughter Wednesday against the state's top health officer over an outbreak of deadly Legionnaires' disease during the Flint water crisis.

Nick Lyon, the director of Michigan's Department of Health and Human Services, is being charged in relation to the death of Flint resident Robert Skidmore, aged 85, on December 13, 2015. Lyon is accused of failing to alert the public to an outbreak of Legionnaires' disease in the city. Documents show Lyon was aware of the outbreak as early as January 2015. He is the highest-ranking state official charged to date.

With this indictment, the investigation touches for the first time the inner circle of the administration of Michigan Republican Governor Rick Snyder. On Wednesday, Schuette said Snyder is not being charged with any crimes related to the Flint's lead-contaminated water but left the door open to the possibility, according to the *Detroit News*.

Four other public officials, who had previously been charged with lesser crimes, also face involuntary manslaughter charges over the death of Skidmore. They include former Flint Emergency Manager Darnell Earley; Liane Shekter-Smith, the former Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) official in charge of drinking water; Stephen Busch, another DEQ official; along with Howard Croft, who headed the City of Flint Water Department.

If convicted the defendants could face up to 15 years in prison.

Another top Michigan health official, Dr. Eden Wells, the state's chief medical executive, is being charged with obstruction of justice in connection to the water crisis and ensuing cover-up. She was named along with other state officials in a lawsuit filed last year by Flint resident LeeAnne Walters. The suit charges that they bore responsibility for the lead poisoning of Walters' children.

There are now a total of 15 Michigan public officials charged in relation to the Flint water crisis. There have been repeated public calls for the charging and arrest of Snyder,

who oversaw the disaster in Flint that resulted in the lead contamination of the city's water supply and the poisoning of 100,000 people.

An outbreak of Legionnaires' disease that resulted in the death of 12 people is also being blamed on the contamination of Flint water that resulted from the criminal switch-over from the Detroit water system to the polluted Flint River. Snyder administration authorities rolled the dice on the health and lives of Flint residents to accelerate their efforts to drive Detroit into bankruptcy and provide a windfall of profits to private developers of the Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA) pipeline.

The charges against the Michigan officials have been brought in the face of massive and continuing popular anger over the crisis in Flint. Public documents made available so far point to a conspiracy by Democratic and Republican officials at all levels to keep Flint residents in the dark over the poisoning of their water.

E-mail records show that Health and Human Services Director Lyons was aware at least by January 2015 of a spike in Legionnaires' disease cases in Genesee County, which encompasses Flint. He even ordered an epidemiological investigation. E-mail records also show while Genesee County Public Health officials were aware of the outbreak, they kept it from the public, informing only a relative handful of physicians.

Lyon apparently sought to divert attention from the real source of the outbreak, the untreated Flint water system, by claiming issues with the plumbing at McLaren Flint Hospital, where many of the victims were treated, was behind the outbreak of Legionnaires' disease.

In addition to causing 12 deaths the Legionnaires' outbreak sickened 90 people. Virginia Tech University professors Marc Edwards and Amy Pruden have asserted that the outbreak of Legionnaires' disease resulted from the highly corrosive Flint River water leaching iron from Flint pipes that then combined with the chlorine, thus preventing the chlorine from killing bacteria. This left Flint residents vulnerable to the outbreak of the deadly waterborne disease.

Others charged to date include former Flint Emergency Manager Gerald Ambrose; Howard Croft, Flint's director of public works; and former utilities director Daugherty Johnson. Mike Glasgow, head of Flint's water treatment plant, accepted a plea deal offered by the state in exchange for securing his cooperation with the investigation. Earley, Ambrose and Croft could face prison terms ranging up to 46 years relating to the corrupt decision to issue bonds to fund the controversial KWA pipeline project, the building of which motivated the switch from Detroit water.

One of those who has so far escaped indictment is former Michigan Treasurer General Andy Dillon, the highest-ranking Democratic Party officeholder in the state at the time of the unfolding of the Flint water crisis. Dillon signed off on the decision to allow Flint to join the KWA.

The breadth of the indictments and the fact that so many ranking state officials had a hand in the Flint crisis and cover-up points to a conspiracy orchestrated at the highest levels. It is simply not believable that Snyder's office had no role in the disaster.

In remarks following the announcement of the indictments Snyder defended both Lyon and Wells and said they would not be suspended from their posts pending a trial. He called Lyon a "strong leader" completely "committed to Flint's recovery." He continued, "Director Lyon and Dr. Wells have been and continue to be instrumental in Flint's recovery. They have my full faith and confidence, and will remain on duty at DHHS."

These comments have something of the character of circling the wagons on the part of the Snyder administration. Snyder appointed Lyon to his current cabinet post in April 2015, just as the Flint water crisis was reaching a critical stage, with angry protests by Flint residents building. He had earlier defended Lyon as reports surfaced that Schuette's investigation was probing top health officials in the state.

The indictments by Schuette appear to be an attempt to salvage credibility by the Republicans. For his part Schuette is being heavily promoted as a possible Republican candidate for governor. In recent polls Schuette had a significant lead over his nearest potential competitor for the 2018 Michigan Republican gubernatorial primary.

It is too early to say how the official investigation into the Flint water crisis will play out. No trials have yet been scheduled as the cases wind slowly through the courts.

While those accused are implicated in serious malfeasance, when viewed in the context of the magnitude of the crimes committed, the court proceedings are themselves part of the cover-up. They are designed to divert attention from the broader implications of the Flint water crisis, which is a crime of capitalism carried out by the most powerful corporate and financial interests and their political front men

in both political parties.

The events in this former center of the General Motors manufacturing center demonstrate once again the incompatibility of a social system based on the defense of private wealth with the needs of working people. Beginning with the decision to help fund the KWA pipeline, at every stage of the Flint crisis the health and safety of residents took a back seat to the profit drive of big business.

Nothing has meanwhile been resolved for Flint residents. More than a year and a half after the official exposure the replacement of lead pipes has barely begun while no serious assistance is being offered to the thousands of children suffering irreversible effects of drinking lead-tainted water.

This underscores the fact that an accounting for the crimes committed against the people of Flint, including the full compensation of the victims and a rebuilding of the infrastructure, require the independent political mobilization of the working class against the entire corporate political establishment.

We urge Flint residents interested in finding out more about the socialist answer to the Flint water crisis to attend our public meeting:

### **3 Years on: The Flint Water Crisis and the Case for Socialism**

Speaker: *World Socialist Web Site* Labor Editor Jerry White

Thursday, June 15, 7:00 pm

University of Michigan—Flint

Murchie Science Building, Room 306



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