Chicago water meter program halted after testing reveals lead contamination

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10 July 2019

Chicago's mayor, Lori Lightfoot, has halted work on the installation of new water meters across the city after new rounds of water testing revealed significant lead contamination of drinking water in many homes. More than one out of every five homes with newly installed "smart" water meters were found to have spikes in lead in water.

The findings of significant levels of lead in Chicago's water are not new. Officials have known for many years that the city has a serious lead contamination issue related to drinking water.

While most major water mains are being replaced, many homes in Chicago continue to access the water through old lead service lines. A joint study conducted on 32 homes by the Chicago Department of Water Management and the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) published in 2013 unequivocally stated, "Lead levels measured with sequential sampling were highest within the lead service lines, with maximum values more than four times higher than Chicago's regulatory compliance results using a first-draw sampling protocol."

Lead levels rise with water shutoffs for works like water meter installation. The homes with highest lead levels detected in the last two years are associated with known disturbances to the lead service lines, such as meter installation, service line leak repairs, auto-meter reader installation, and other work such as street excavations near water pipes.

A 2017 state law requires the city to provide notification to residents of lead exposure risks when repairing or working around service lines. However, when challenged by reporters on compliance with this regulation, the Chicago Water Department remained silent.

Previous Mayor Rahm Emanuel's water commissioner, Randy Conner, and health commissioner, Dr. Julie Morita, only disclosed last year that a secret study conducted by the city in 2016 had revealed elevated lead levels in 51 out of 296 homes that had water meters installed. For more than five years, Emanuel and his aides had denied the existence of the widespread and serious lead problem that existed. The eventual revelation by his administration was made as part of a damage control campaign as revelations about the lead poisoning of Flint, Michigan, provoked national and international outrage.

According to the *Chicago Tribune*, Mayor Lightfoot halted the installation of water meters when a state appeals court revived a lawsuit filed in May 2019 on behalf of residents seeking to force the city to replace the lead access lines.

As of 2017, the city had tested 510 homes with 22 percent demonstrating elevated levels of lead concentration after meter installations. According to results from a spreadsheet posted on a Water Department website, one of the samples from a South Side home contained an astronomical 140 parts per billion (ppb).

In 2018, the *Chicago Tribune* documented results from hundreds of Chicagoans that had taken up the city's offer to distribute free lead-testing kits. They found lead in the water in nearly 70 percent of the 2,797 homes tested. The tap water in 3 of every 10 homes had lead concentrations over the 5-ppb limit the FDA requires for bottled water.

Scientists and physicians have for several decades explained that there is no lower limit that can be considered safe and an absolute zero should be the standard.

Egregiously, the Water Department has been telling residents they should run their water for several

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minutes to “flush out” the system after a period of inactivity or service. Yet, analysis indicates that lead concentrations can be variable and may rise even after several minutes of “letting the water run.” Furthermore, researchers have also documented that lead levels can remain elevated for several months to years after street work or plumbing repairs are completed.

Exposure to lead can cause injury to the nervous system including weakness and nerve pain, as well as other assortments of ailments such as weakened immune response to disease, kidney injury, high blood pressure, muscle and joint pain, and infertility. In children, the consequences can be far more serious with stunted brain development and reduction in intelligence quotient as well as aggressive and emotional behaviors. Even low levels (below those set by the FDA) have been associated with learning disabilities. The human body cannot remove the lead; it accumulates over time in soft tissues, organs, bones and teeth.

Only in 1986 did an amendment to the Safe Drinking Water Act impose a ban on the use of lead pipes in public water systems across the United States. However, by then, more than 80 percent of Chicago were receiving their drinking water through lead pipes. Over time, these lead pipes can corrode, resulting in lead particles dissolving in drinking water.

In late 2000, Chicago began modernizing its water system by changing out the main water lines, replacing them with cast iron pipes. In 2011, Mayor Emanuel borrowed $412 million from a federal-state loan fund for the water conservation projects, including the placement of water meters in homes. The Chicago water projects, however, did not include replacement of the lead access pipes, shifting the decision and financial responsibility for such modifications on homeowners who have meanwhile seen their water bills rise to pay off said loan.

Even though Chicago officials have argued that these access lines are considered private property, EPA lawyers, under pressure from the criminal response to the Flint disaster, have advised state regulators that “Lead pipes can contaminate water at any point, including on its way into a private home. Allowing a public water system to use its funds to replace such pipes is consistent with the overall health protections of the Safe Drinking Water Act.”

It is estimated that there are nearly 385,000 lead service lines that need to be replaced in Chicago at an average cost of $3,800. Such an endeavor would only require approximately $1.5 billion, less than 15 percent of the $12 billion net worth of Chicago’s richest resident, hedge fund manager Ken Griffin.

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