# Bottled water distributions begin as lead water poisoning crisis erupts in Newark, New Jersey

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The public health crisis in New Jersey's largest city continues to escalate, as tests last week once again showed that Newark residents remain exposed to high levels of lead in drinking water, even with filters distributed at the end of 2018 under a program ostensibly aimed at reducing exposure to the neurotoxin.

On Monday, the city began handing out bottled water to residents at four locations for those living in the affected areas of Newark. Anger mounted as some residents were turned away, declared ineligible or given the dubious filters rather than clean bottled water. Others left in frustration, unwilling to wait in hours-long lines.

"The water problem in Newark is getting real bad, almost like Flint, Michigan," Newark resident Faith Davis told *CBS2 News* while in line for water Monday. "Something should've been done a long time ago and they should've let us know." City officials knew that high levels of lead had been detected in drinking fountains at public school buildings as early as 2010 and discovered elevated lead levels after citywide testing of home taps began in 2017.

Indeed, many of the experiences in Flint, the most notorious example of government officials criminally conspiring to allow poisoned water to be sold to residents, are being repeated in Newark. Even five years after the crisis began in that city, Flint residents are still fighting for clean water.

Newark, like Flint, Michigan, has seen decades of disinvestment as its industrial base was gutted. Today it is one of the poorest big cities in the country. An estimated 37 percent of Newark families with children live below the poverty line. Poverty, together with an aging housing stock, are key indicators of lead exposure. These factors are also associated with higher rates of other environmentally triggered health problems like asthma, which is endemic in Newark.

Blood tests verify that a large percentage of children in Newark have been exposed to lead. Even small amounts in the bloodstream can cause lasting damage, especially in young children whose brain development can be impaired. Around a quarter of children under six in the city test positive for potentially harmful levels of blood lead.

The crisis in Newark emerged nearly a decade ago when tests revealed lead-laced drinking water in Newark Public School buildings at alarming levels. Authorities traced the source of the heavy metal to corrosion in the citywide network of transmission pipes, some of which date back to the 1880s, combined with failures to control the problem through chemical treatments at the Pequannock Water Treatment Plant. Tens of thousands of homes in Newark and neighboring communities receive their water from the Pequannock system.

Throughout the most recent period, Newark's Democratic mayor Ras Baraka and New Jersey's governor Phil Murphy have sought to downplay and cover up the extent of the crisis. The city initially refused to release information about the extent of the danger. It was not until last October that Newark, amid a lawsuit by the environmental group National Resources Defense Council and Newark Education Workers Caucus, began distributing filters to affected residents.

In May of this year, the treatment plant began adding a new chemical designed to coat pipes and limit the

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corrosion of lead. Experts warned that the treatment would take at least six months to begin working. Meanwhile, spikes were expected and have in fact occurred.

Since the state began semiannual testing of Newark's water system in 2017, measured concentrations of lead in drinking water have remained above the federal action level of 15 parts per billion, with the top ten percent of measured taps hovering between 18 and 27 parts per billion. By the first half of 2019, this jumped to 57 parts per billion, nearly four times the standard. One home recorded a staggering 544 parts per billion.

Nevertheless, government officials refused to take adequate precautions. The city argued in court that bottled water distribution was unnecessary and filters alone would suffice. State and federal agencies did nothing to ensure the safety of the community.

Test results made public last Friday show how wrong this was. "The data suggest that use of the specific filtration devices distributed by Newark may not be reliably effective, in this particular situation, in reducing lead concentrations to below the standard," the Environmental Protection Agency wrote in a letter to the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection last Friday. "This means that we are unable at this time to assure Newark residents that their health is fully protected when drinking tap water filtered through these devices."

Amid this prolonged health disaster, city, state and federal officials continue to slow walk infrastructure improvements that would actually reduce the lead risk long-term. The tens of thousands of residents with poisoned water are expected to wait at minimum eight years for the change out of lead service lines, according to an infrastructure plan initiated this year.

The state initiated a $75 million bond in March to cover some of the costs of the program. However, homeowners are responsible for providing up to $1000 to replace the pipes, an amount that is daunting if not impossible for a substantial percentage of Newark's low-income population.

The crisis in Newark is part of a much broader national and international public health disaster. It is estimated that in the US alone, 10 million homes are served by lead pipes.

Despite a series of lead contamination scandals—from Washington DC in 2001 to Flint in 2014 and now Newark—the federal government, under Democratic as well as Republican control, has refused to implement any major infrastructure plan to change out these dangerous water systems. Instead, as the wealth of society is hoarded by billionaires, the twin parties of the rich flood the military with a record $738 billion budget for 2020 while claiming there is no money for even the most fundamental needs of the working class, including clean drinking water.

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