

Lead contamination crisis grows

## Newark, New Jersey suspends distribution of bottled water over expiration concerns

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On Tuesday, city officials in Newark, New Jersey were forced to halt handouts of bottled water over concerns over expiration labels. The emergency distribution had just begun on Monday in response to reports last week of high lead contamination in the city's drinking water even after the use of home tap filters.

The carelessness of the city government's approach to the crisis was revealed after thousands of cases of bottled water which were being handed out were past their labeled expiration date. The slapdash character of the response was further exposed as many residents were turned away from water distribution centers or had to wait in long lines.

While bottled water has no expiration and those being handed out were safe to drink—the expiration label itself is a peculiarity of New Jersey legislation—the response by city officials further exposed not only the criminal indifferences of the state in the face of a public health danger which has been known about for nearly a decade, but a deep fear by the ruling layers of the city that the water crisis could set off a social explosion.

After reports of high lead content in home drinking water surfaced last year, Newark city officials had promised residents that the water filters supplied to them would remove over 99 percent of the neurotoxin. This was exposed as a lie after approximately two thirds of the water samples tested by the city last month and submitted to the state Department of Environmental Protection showed lead levels in excess of the 15 parts per billion action level set by the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Three of the 32 samples taken exceeded 50 parts per billion, more than three times the legal limit.

Newark resident Emmet Coleman, a senior citizen with a heart transplant, told *USA Today* that he spent an hour on Monday waiting for two cases of bottled water. "In the senior building, it's bad," he said. "All of us are sick or have problems, and we can't drink the water. And the filters aren't working."

Testing in the water lines of Newark Public Schools revealed that students and staff were consistently exposed to dangerous levels of lead since at least 2011-2012. After the Newark Board of Education responded by turning off and "fixing" water fountains and installing new pipes, the danger of lead contamination affecting broader parts of the city was ignored until testing again revealed elevated lead levels in 2016. This prompted a study commissioned by Newark in January 2017 which revealed that 10 percent of the city's homes had water lead levels nearly twice the federal standard.

According to CDM Smith, the company which conducted the study, the lead leak likely started because Newark had been reducing the pH levels of the water since 2012. Water with higher pH levels mixes with the disinfectants that large water systems like Newark use to eliminate microbes to form cancer-causing compounds. However, because the pipes supplying the water were lined with lead, the low pH water corroded some of the estimated 22,000 pipes in the city and possibly contaminated the entire city's drinking water supply.

Aiming to quell growing public outrage, city officials began in October 2018 to frantically distribute PUR water filters, the same used in Flint, Michigan after its water system was contaminated with lead five years ago. As recent tests prove, however, the filters did

nothing to make drinking water safe in Newark.

The culpability for the crisis lies particularly with the Democratic Party, which has controlled the city for nearly seven decades. The decay of infrastructure and exposure of the Newark residents to poisoned water has taken place over years, notably under Cory Booker, the US senator who is a contender for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination, and was Newark's mayor from 2006 to 2013.

Over the course of the developing crisis, the city sought to downplay the problem and repeatedly lied to its residents, with Democratic Mayor Ras J. Baraka writing in 2016 to Newark public school parents "However, let me begin by saying that the WATER IN NEWARK HOMES AND BUSINESSES IS SAFE and you should in no way alter the ways in which you consume or use it in your daily regimen. Moreover, the elevated levels found in the samples do not rise to the level of critical nor dangerous..."

The city establishment insisted that the water was "absolutely safe to drink" and "some of the best water in the state of New Jersey" despite being cited by the Department of Environmental Protection for lead contamination three times since 2017. Baraka has continued to claim that "The majority of people in the city of Newark don't have this problem. They don't have lead service lines. ... Folks have created panic."

Recent testing has shown this to be a lie: 47.2 percent of Newark households tested exceed the action level for lead set by the EPA.

This level is arbitrary since any level of lead is harmful. A 2016 study by the University of Quebec found that children exposed to lead in water with concentration as low as one part per billion for six months had a 35 percent increase in the amount of lead in their blood.

Lead consumption is proven to lead to developmental disabilities, hearing loss, and anemia. Setting the action level to five parts per billion, the benchmark set by the Food and Drug Administration for water, means that under recent testing over 70 percent of Newark households are at risk.

Five years after the lead in water crisis in Flint, the lead contamination crisis in Newark has exposed the rot of basic infrastructure across the United States. It is estimated that approximately six to ten million lead service lines still exist in the US and that as many as 45

million Americans are exposed to lead-contaminated water.

The only way to solve this crisis is to replace all lead service lines, which is estimated to cost from \$16 to \$80 billion. Rather than repairing its deadly and decaying infrastructure, the American ruling class passed a \$738 billion military budget in 2019.



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