

# Newark and New Jersey officials continue to dissemble about statewide lead poisoning crisis

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Earlier this month, the results of testing conducted in Newark, New Jersey's public schools in August 2018 were released, showing that seven schools have lead-contaminated water. These results were released as the result of a public records request by WNYC/Gothamist; the city government of Newark did not post the results on its website, a violation of state rules.

Lead is a deadly neurotoxin, which has especially harmful effects on children because it impairs neural development, which may impact learning, delay growth and cause hearing loss. There is no safe level of lead consumption, and the federal standard of 15 parts per billion, which is being used by Newark as a measure of whether water is safe to consume or not, is still a dangerously high amount, according to experts.

Just last month, Newark's Superintendent of Schools, Roger Leon, said in a local radio talk show interview that "we have information that is clearly indicating that the water sources that our students are being provided is safe for them to drink." Kareem Adeem, the city's Water Department Director, said in a town hall meeting earlier this month, "The schools [do] independent testing and they post that testing on their website. They don't have lead in the schools."

This amounts to an admission that, for over a year, testing results showing that lead contamination is possibly poisoning children in their schools were suppressed by city officials.

On October 2, Newark's Democratic Mayor Ras Baraka held a "State of the Water" town hall meeting at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, to declare that recent testing released by the city found 97 percent of water filters it distributed last year to be effective in filtering out lead. The details of this study, however,

have yet to be released to the public, and the claim is especially dubious given the inadequate instructions and support for filter installation provided to residents. As a result of the study, the city has ceased its distribution of bottled water.

Baraka had the gall to defend the city's management of the ongoing lead crisis, stating, "I will never concede that we allowed people to drink lead coming from the water without telling them." He was joined on stage by health officials, including State Department of Environmental Protection Commissioner Catherine McCabe, who praised Baraka's response, wishing that other systems were "as responsive" as Newark.

If Newark is to be categorized as "responsive" to its water crisis, then this paints a bleak picture for water contamination in the rest of the state and across the US. When the news broke that Newark public schools' drinking water was tainted with lead in 2016 (after an earlier instance in 2011), Baraka wrote a letter to residents insisting, "WATER IN NEWARK HOMES AND BUSINESSES IS SAFE and you should in no way alter the ways you consume or use it in your daily regimen." A subsequent study by the engineering firm CDM Smith revealed this to be false, and further proved that over 70 percent of households in the city had lead-tainted water.

It was only after the federal Environmental Protection Agency stepped in that Newark finally began, in August of this year, to distribute two dozen cases of bottled water per week to resident households who were deemed eligible. However, even this response ignored most of the residents with lead-contaminated water, and did not provide enough water for the drinking needs of a single adult male, let alone an entire

household.

Years of criminal mismanagement of the lead crisis were beginning to foment popular opposition in the form of protests and explosive town halls, which led city and state officials to quickly pass a \$120 million bond funding for the replacement of the 18,000 lead service lines in Newark.

Newark residents, however, did not get a chance to view the details of the bond, which have yet to be released, and the plan will do nothing to replace lead pipes in housing units themselves, which is a major source of lead contamination in Newark homes.

In an additional effort to quell the rising anger of workers in the city, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey has resolved a long-disputed agreement on leasing land in Newark. Baraka says funds from the \$155 million annual lease will be used to cover the repayment of the bonds.

Newark is not the only city in the state that is affected by lead-contaminated water. According to estimates compiled from New Jersey municipal water utilities, approximately 350,000 lead service lines need to be replaced statewide in 104 water systems, affecting five million of New Jersey's nearly nine million residents. Most lead service lines were installed before 1940.

New Jersey's governor, Democrat and multi-millionaire Goldman Sachs alumnus Phil Murphy, has unveiled a proposal to replace all lead service lines in the state by 2029. He has asked the legislature to approve placing a \$500 million bond issue on the November 2020 ballot in order to raise the funds needed to begin the replacement project. In order to cover the rest of the cost of replacing the state's service lines, the plan would allow private water utilities to raise rates to cover costs. The cost of replacing a lead service line in an average home is estimated to be \$6,000.

The use of loans to fund replacement projects will mean cuts to social services and increases in taxes.

The capitalist system is incapable of addressing this crisis. Despite the urgency of the situation, residents of Newark and New Jersey are not being provided clean water and continue to live in toxic conditions. The state and city have not declared states of emergency even though residents are still being exposed to a deadly neurotoxin in their water supply. Instead, all they are being offered is lies and long-term plans which, if they

materialize, will ultimately be paid for by the working class of the state. Furthermore, millions of residents are living in older housing, which holds a variety of other hazards, such as lead paint and asbestos.



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