

# Michigan state officials continue cover-up and whitewashing of three-year lead water contamination crisis in Benton Harbor

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Last week, the government of Benton Harbor, Michigan declared a state of emergency in response to the lead contamination of the city's water supply.

The declaration in the western Michigan city comes three years into the lead crisis, which local, state, and federal officials criminally neglected until last month. The state of emergency grants Democratic Mayor Marcus Muhammad power to take control of various elements of local government, including the police, though it remains unknown how he will apply these new powers.

The contamination crisis arose in 2018 after testing revealed lead contamination of the city's water at 22 parts per billion (ppb) and some houses with shocking 800 ppb and above. Consuming any amount of lead is severely dangerous. The deadly neurotoxin can damage the kidneys, general nervous system, and negatively affect body and brain development.

On top of the lead poisoning, the water main supplying Benton Harbor broke on Wednesday, cutting off water for most of the city for nearly 24 hours. The latest disaster is a predictable product of chronic neglect and underfunding, which resulted in Benton Harbor's water treatment plant roof collapsing in on itself and its primary water supply line falling into serious disrepair before the lead crisis was manifested in 2018.

Expressing growing anger among residents over the crisis, a petition is being circulated to recall Mayor Muhammad over his administration's neglectful response over the last three years.

As these recent developments unfolded in Benton Harbor this week, Hamtramck, a small city within the borders of Detroit, issued a warning to residents

following the discovery of lead contamination of 17 ppb. This warning came with caveats, as, like in the case of Benton Harbor, officials have not directly identified the issue as widespread and are instead stating residents can volunteer for testing or filters if they are worried about lead poisoning.

Like Benton Harbor, Hamtramck is deeply impoverished, with 46 percent of residents living below the poverty line, one percent higher than Benton Harbor's.

Already, some residents are beginning to identify signs of the burgeoning lead crisis' effects, despite the muted response of officials. One Hamtramck resident described his realization following the lead warning in a social media post about the likely cause of a persistent rash, peeling skin, and full-body itching, similar to the early symptoms experienced by Flint residents in April 2014. His symptoms arose while working from home during the pandemic, in which he began drinking considerably more tap water than he did previously.

The crises unfolding in Benton Harbor and Hamtramck signal a broader reality of widespread lead piping infrastructure, which sit like ticking time bombs across the US. A recent report by the Natural Resources Defense Council gives a picture of this crisis. The report provides a low estimate of between 9.2 and 12.7 million pipes across the country containing lead.

On Tuesday, October 19, Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer visited Benton Harbor unannounced to hold a press conference alongside Mayor Muhammad. At the event, she announced her administration was calling for the state legislature to pass an additional \$11.4 million to fund the

replacement of Benton Harbor's lead pipes, which officials aim to complete in the next 18 months. With roughly \$19 million in funds currently allocated for the project, the additional \$11.4 million would bring total funds to \$30 million, the estimated cost of replacing the city's 6000 service lines.

There are currently no publicly funded plans for replacing lead pipes within homes. While the exact number with lead piping is unknown, the city's old age raises the likelihood of many homes needing extensive replacements.

In announcing her plans, Whitmer stated, "I cannot imagine the stress that moms and dads in Benton Harbor are under as they emerge from a pandemic, work hard to put food on the table, pay the bills, and face a threat to the health of their children. That's why we will not rest until every parent feels confident to give their kid a glass of water knowing that it is safe."

Where was this supposed concern for residents between 2018 and October? From the time of the widespread lead contamination in Benton Harbor manifested in 2018 last month, the Snyder and Whitmer administrations ignored the issue entirely. Governor Whitmer took until last month to shorten the criminal 20-year pipe replacement plan set by local officials in 2018 to a five-year plan. Only this month did that plan shrink to the current 18-month plan under mounting public pressure.

The state government's response earlier in October is significant only when compared to its years of neglect. The state waited until October 6 to formally advise residents to switch from tap to bottled water, which it began providing, for cooking, drinking, brushing teeth, and mixing baby formula. For years, residents, kept in the dark by government neglect, drank poisoned water, and mothers fed their children with lead-tainted formula. The damage to the lives of children, who face the greatest danger in lead poisoning, is likely significant.

Underlying the most recent plans from state officials is a coordinated effort to cover up their criminal neglect while smothering the issue. Whitmer's call for an additional \$11.4 million in funds from the Republican-controlled legislature will likely stall out as her call for \$20 million in funding for Benton Harbor did last month which was whittled down to \$10 million in the budget. Whitmer is undeniably aware of this and plans

to utilize this to excuse further stalling down the road.

Statements from officials supporting the Governor's latest actions are gearing up for this outcome. Responding to questions on whether he was disappointed with the Whitmer administration's late response, Mayor Muhammad stated, "My Bible says that money solveth all things. This is a \$30 million job, and the money was not there three years ago."

This statement is a lie, especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Near the beginning of the pandemic in March of 2020, the ruling class representatives rushed to pass the \$2.7 trillion CARES Act. The majority of this funding went to resuscitating the faltering stock market, with only a pittance of it going to workers.

Comparing this effort to dump hundreds of billions of dollars into the coffers of Wall Street, Benton Harbor residents have suffered three years of poisoned water only to struggle to find a few million. Instead of quick action, they received belated gestures and an 18-month solution full of holes.

The outcome of this is clear. While workers and residents of communities like Benton Harbor suffer from the impact of the pandemic and compounding crises, the world's leading banks took in \$170 billion over the last four quarters, making it the most profitable period in history.

Yet, ruling class officials state there is no money to keep workers safe from the pandemic, maintain safe drinking water, and rebuild the decaying infrastructure. The immense social crime of the ruling class lays completely exposed.



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