

State of emergency declared in Flint, Michigan over poisoned water supply

By Matthew Brennan and Lawrence Porter
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The newly-elected mayor of Flint, Michigan, Karen Weaver, held a press conference Tuesday to declare a state of emergency in response to the lead poisoning of the almost 100,000 residents of the city through the water supply. Underlying the state of emergency is the deep-going political crisis that has erupted over the water crisis.

Weaver took office in November after campaigning almost exclusively against the role of the previous mayor, Dayne Walling, in the lead poisoning of the city. Since then, two city officials close to Walling have resigned: Public Works director Howard Croft and city attorney Peter Bade.

Weaver's announcement of a state of emergency included the call for the Genesee County Board of Commissioners to hold a special meeting to approve the declaration designation. That approval is necessary in order to obtain federal disaster aid to treat the ongoing and impending health crisis caused by lead in water exposure.

Initially, County Board Chairman Jamie Curtis rebuffed the declaration, stating, "It's not going to change anything...Nothing more can be done." Having declared a Public Health Emergency in early October, he stated that the board and state had already obtained the maximum amount of federal funding available. He later reversed his position and said the board would hear Weaver's request for approval but would not call the meeting until January 4 at the earliest.

Weaver's announcement came one day after the Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA) sent 28,000 liters of drinking water to the region to address the crisis.

The current crisis was set into motion when the state-appointed Emergency Financial Manager Darnell Earley severed ties with the Detroit water system and

switched the city's water source to the Flint River. The city had decided to connect to the pipeline being built by the Karegnondi Water Authority, which was not due to be completed until late 2016. The interim move to Flint River water was made without proper testing and preparation.

Several health crises have since emerged including multiple E Coli outbreaks, a significant increase in cancer-causing chlorine disinfectant byproducts (trihalomethanes), and in September of 2015 multiple scientific investigations revealed a significant increase in lead levels in both the water supply and the infant child population of Flint. In early October 2015, Governor Rick Snyder belatedly decided to switch the Flint water supply back to Detroit after public outcry.

Even after this switch, Marc Edwards, the lead researcher from the Virginia Tech team that exposed the lead levels in the water supply, stated that it would take at least 4 to 6 more months for the existing service to be even remotely safe for drinking or cooking. The emergency measures announced in October have thus far not involved overhauling the aged water pipe infrastructure, but rather adding phosphates to the existing lead and copper pipes to coat them to prevent lead leaching.

Within weeks of the April 2014 switch, residents began complaining of an acrid smell and yellow and brown discoloration in the water. Soon after complaints emerged of skin rashes, hair loss, rotting shower tiles, and tooth decay. At every level and with every development angry residents of Flint have been met with total disregard from both political parties and all levels of government. Edwards' findings and the blood and lead-level studies done on 1- and 2-year-olds by Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha were initially denounced by state and city officials.

The criminal actions by local and state officials were followed with indifference and lies to the population, resulting in the outrage expressed by the victims of the Flint water crisis.

A reporter from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to residents of Flint who attended Mayor Weaver's press conference. Melissa Mays, a mother and member of the community action group Water You Fighting For, expressed widely-held anger.

"I'm outraged about the entire process. My kids are sick, my husband is sick, I am sick. We have been diagnosed as being poisoned from lead, copper, aluminum and chromium just to name a few. My oldest son, 17 years old, has his teeth falling apart. He has holes in the side of his teeth. My middle child, who is 12 years old, fell off a bike and now has a buckle fracture in his wrist because his bones are so weak. The doctor couldn't believe the way it broke. Every night he can't sleep because of the discomfort and pain."

Melissa said her youngest son, who is 11 years old, is anemic with a low white blood cell count that makes him prone to infections. "All three of my boys have problems with concentration and their memories. Everyone is talking about the future for their kids. Well, my kids had a future before this.

"I feel really horrible because I told the kids to drink water rather than juices. I thought I was doing the right thing for our kids. It turns out that the water is what was making them sick."

Melissa made clear that every level of government should be held responsible for this.

"I blame the former administration [former mayor, Dayne Walling, a Democrat], the Emergency Manager [Darnell Earley], and the governor [Republican Rick Snyder]. The mayor oversaw the whole affair. Then you have the MDEQ [Michigan Department of Environmental Quality].

"They knew exactly what was happening and sat on the information...[the EPA] also had people who know what's going on and did nothing. It is their job to protect us. Because of their failures 100,000 people have been made sick. All of them are shirking responsibility and blaming everyone else."

Gladyes Williamson, a retired auto worker, also spoke to the WSWS.

"I am so angry about this. It's terrible. They are destroying an entire generation of children. The way

they treat us, we are expendable as far as they are concerned. It makes you feel like we have been eradicated. We just haven't been placed in the ground yet."

Gladyes said she went through bankruptcy and is having a hard time making ends meet. "I worked in the Buick plant for over 30 years. But when I retired I never thought I would be so poor. But that's all that is left in Flint; retirees, those on social services and those in the legal system.

"Forget the issue of color. Everyone is affected by this. Believe me, the American Dream is dead. This city had so much here and it will never be the same. The way I see it we are all in chains. The wage levels are so low they keep people in slavery."

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