

Obama administration to cut off Flint emergency aid

By James Brewer
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The US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) assistance being provided to Flint as a result of the Obama administration's limited declaration of an emergency over the lead poisoning of the city's water was due to expire in mid April. On March 25, FEMA sent a letter to the state of Michigan informing it of a limited four-month extension, at which point "no further extensions will be granted."

This is a slap in the face for the people of Flint, who have been fighting to have their complaints and concerns heard for almost two years after the city's water source was switched to the corrosive Flint River. Five months after the city's water source was finally switched back to the treated Lake Huron water supplied by Detroit, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is still advising Flint residents not to drink, cook or brush their teeth with the still-toxic tap water.

Obama's declaration of emergency for Flint came on January 16 and only allocated \$5 million in aid—a miserly \$50 for each resident. The Obama administration would not designate the crisis as a disaster, in which case \$100 million would be committed, supposedly because it was man-made. That then set the stage for three sessions of the Congressional oversight committee—one in February and two in March—where Republican and Democratic Party politicians took the opportunity to grandstand and point accusatory fingers at the agencies under the control of the rival party.

The Obama administration, along with state and local government officials of both parties, played a critical role in creating and covering up the disaster in Flint.

In her Congressional testimony, Gina McCarthy, the administrator of the EPA and an appointee of Obama, stubbornly refused to acknowledge any responsibility by the agency she directs. The EPA supposedly

oversees state and local authorities to ensure that federal requirements for safe drinking water are followed. Susan Hedman, the administrator for the midwest area covering Michigan, was forced to resign for covering up and prolonging the crisis.

The Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ), after allowing the switch from a safe source of treated lake water to corrosive river water processed through an archaic and untested treatment plant, made the scientifically unjustifiable decision—and illegal under EPA regulations—that corrosion control treatment was not necessary to protect the city's pipes. Publicly, the MDEQ lied that corrosion control was being applied.

That lie was exposed by a resident after she discovered that lead levels in her home were hundreds of times higher than the EPA's action level, and after her children were diagnosed with lead poisoning. In June the EPA became aware from their own expert that high lead levels were being hidden by the MDEQ's deceptive sampling methods, yet refused to act and silenced the employee who made the discovery.

Flint pediatrician Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha wrote a comment that appeared in last weekend's Sunday Review section of the *New York Times*, "The Future for Flint's Children." In it, she describes the unspeakable poisoning as follows: "For almost two years, Flint's children have been drinking water through lead-coated straws." She notes the long-term consequences: "Developmental neurobiology has taught us that adverse childhood experiences and toxic stress change the trajectory of a child's life in predictable ways.

To address the effects of lead poisoning, Hanna-Attisha called for "evidence-based interventions to promote [child] development. These include maternal infant support and early literacy programs;

universal preschool; school health services; nutrition programs; and primary medical care and mental health care. All vulnerable children need these interventions, but kids in Flint need them now, not next month or next year.”

All of this would require a massive infusion of funds, “much more than the \$220 million Congress is considering for water infrastructure and health-related services to communities nationwide.” While writing that she is “hopeful” that the Michigan legislature will pass the \$195 million being recommended by Republican Governor Rick Snyder, she adds, “even this support would not address the full magnitude of this problem, which will continue throughout these children’s lives.”

There is no question that a huge commitment of resources is needed, not just in Flint but throughout the county. In recent months, lead poisoned cities have been uncovered throughout the country, caused in part by the slashing of federal government funds for water infrastructure to a mere 25 percent of what it was in 1977.

The Obama administration’s decision to cut off Flint is part of a broader effort by both parties to provide as little as possible to address a crisis for which they are responsible. This is under conditions in which unlimited resources are made available to bail out the banks and finance the US war machine.

The 2015 budget for military spending is almost \$600 billion. The \$220 million that is being proposed by Congress and the Obama administration for the *entire US water infrastructure budget* is just 0.037 percent of what is spent for war.

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