

Who's who in the Flint water crisis: Part two

By Carlos Delgado
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Despite President Obama's arrogant and dismissive assertion that the lead-poisoned children of Flint "will be fine," the Flint water crisis has inflicted, and continues to inflict, widespread devastation upon the residents of the city. Government corruption and criminality throughout the crisis has caused irreparable harm and catastrophic injury to countless people, including deadly disease, permanent neurological damage to developing minds, and severe psychological trauma. The entire city has become the scene of a massive crime, whose victims number in the tens of thousands, and whose perpetrators infest every level of government.

A convergence of powerful financial interests worked to sever the city of Flint from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department's (DWSD) water system, which it had been connected to for half a century. At stake were the viability of the Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA) pipeline project as well as a long-standing plot to monetize, and eventually privatize, the Detroit water system. With Democrat and Republican officials colluding to end Flint's relationship to the DWSD, and the KWA pipeline still years from completion, the city of Flint needed a primary drinking water source to meet its needs until the pipeline's completion.

For this, officials turned to the corrosive and polluted Flint River.

Flint Emergency Manager Darnell Earley

Darnell Earley was the state-appointed Emergency Manager in charge of Flint during the time that the city switched to the Flint River as its primary water source. For his role in the crisis, he has rightfully earned the hatred of masses of people, both in Flint and across the nation. Despite this, he has repeatedly asserted that he is entirely without blame in the affair.

Earley, a black Democrat, began his career as director of community development in the conservative Urban League of Greater Muskegon in 1978. From there he moved through a number of state and municipal government positions, including township manager for Buena Vista Charter Township, director of research and public policy for the Michigan House Democratic Caucus, and Ingham County budget director and deputy controller. He was appointed city administrator of Flint in 2001 and served as acting mayor for five months in 2002 after the previous mayor was recalled. During this time, he worked under emergency manager Ed Kurtz, the man who would later be responsible for approving the KWA plan and beginning the initial preparations for the switch to the Flint River during Flint's second "emergency" in 2013.

Michigan Governor Rick Snyder appointed Earley as Flint's emergency manager in October 2013, six months after city and state officials had agreed to sever ties with the DWSD. Kurtz had contracted an engineering firm to begin preparing the mothballed Flint Water Treatment Plant to treat Flint River water, and Earley was tasked with seeing the switch through to completion. As manager, Earley was paid a salary of \$180,000 a year, more than four times the city's median salary.

Despite multiple attempts by the DWSD to reenter into a contract with the city of Flint, including a proposal that would have saved 20 percent over the KWA's proposal, Earley refused to consider the option. He also rejected offers to stay with the DWSD until the KWA pipeline was completed, telling a DWSD official in March 2014 that "there will be no

need for Flint to continue purchasing water to serve its residents and businesses after April 17, 2014." Powerful financial interests were conspiring to gain control of Detroit's water system, and severing the Flint connection under the phony banner of "cost-cutting" was an integral part of the plan.

On April 25, 2014, the city of Flint officially switched its water supply to the Flint River, hosting a "changeover ceremony" in which Earley, Flint Mayor Dayne Walling, and others cheered and toasted the switch.

Residents immediately complained about the acrid taste, foul smell, and turbid appearance of the water, and of rashes and hair loss caused by coming into contact with it. Officials sent out boil water advisories due to the presence of E. coli and coliform bacteria, and Genesee County Health Department specialists began to suspect a connection between the Flint River water and the uptick in cases of Legionellosis. Earley dismissed and mocked the concerns, even when they came from the state's own legal team. When the governor's Deputy Legal Counsel and a senior aide argued that Flint should switch back to the DWSD due to the health concerns, Earley said that it would be "cost prohibitive," and that Flint's water problems could be solved while staying with the River water.

After leaving his position, he was appointed the emergency manager of Detroit Public Schools, where filthy, moldy and rat infested classrooms drove teachers into "sickout" protests against his dictates. He resigned from the position in February 2016, receiving a nearly \$83,000 settlement from the state to do so.

To this day, Earley maintains that he bears no responsibility for the Flint crisis, stating in an October 2015 op-ed that the public health catastrophe that has engulfed an entire city was "an unintended consequence resulting in a negative outcome from an otherwise sound public policy decision." In March 2016, in his testimony before Congress, Earley stated that he had been "unjustly persecuted, vilified, and smeared...by a misinformed public."

Flint Mayor Dayne Walling

While many Democratic politicians have sought to lay the blame entirely at the feet of the Republican Snyder administration, painting city officials as helpless bystanders under authoritarian state control, Flint's Democratic Mayor Dayne Walling played a major role both in facilitating the switch to the Flint River and covering up the devastating effects of the crisis once the public health consequences began to come to light.

Walling, the son of two Flint educators and a Rhodes scholar who attended the elite Oxford University, began his political career in Washington, D.C. under Democratic Mayor Anthony Williams, where he worked as manager of research and communication. He later worked as a grant writer in Minnesota and managed several "get out the vote" campaigns for Democratic politicians. He was a regional campaign coordinator for Barack Obama's election campaign in 2008.

After a failed bid for mayor in 2007, Walling won the special general mayoral election in 2009 after the previous mayor's resignation. He immediately began a series of budget cuts, including laying off firefighters and police officers. Walling was the target of a failed recall campaign in 2010.

Later that same year, Walling was elected chair of the Karegnondi Water Authority Board of Trustees.

When Flint was declared by the state of Michigan to be in a state of “financial emergency” in 2011, both Walling and the Flint City Council agreed not to contest the appointment of an emergency manager. Throughout the run-up to the switch, Walling was an enthusiastic supporter of the KWA pipeline project, the severing of connection to the DWSD, and the usage of the Flint River as a primary drinking water source. At the “changeover ceremony,” Walling personally turned off the flow of water from Detroit and stated, “It’s a historic moment for the city of Flint to return to its roots and use our own river as our drinking water supply.”

He added, “The water quality speaks for itself.”

Walling worked tirelessly to convince residents that the water was safe, appearing on local television to drink a glass of water in a political stunt that has since been repeated by both Governor Snyder and President Obama. He stonewalled the Genesee County Health Department’s investigation into the Legionellosis outbreak, and he repeatedly used his Twitter account to tell residents that they had nothing to fear. In late 2014, with residents complaining of caustic water that was burning their skin and bacterial contamination causing outbreaks of disease, Walling became an instructor at the University of Michigan-Flint, teaching a semester on “Institutional & Leadership Practices.”

Only after the situation became politically volatile did Walling attempt to shift blame from himself, adopting the line that the Emergency Manager Earley was solely to blame for the water problems. As evidence mounted that lead leaching had created a tremendous public health emergency, Walling continued to defend the use of Flint River water, telling a team of medical experts who had discovered a dramatic spike in the blood lead levels of Flint children that a return to the DWSD water system would bankrupt the city.

Walling lost re-election to Democrat Karen Weaver in November 2015 in an election largely centered around the water crisis. Only after leaving office did he attempt to recast himself as an opponent of the state’s austerity practices, calling in January 2016 for \$45 million to replace lead service lines in the city, a fraction of the estimated \$1.6 billion actual cost.

Flint Department of Public Works Director Howard Croft

In 2011, Emergency Manager Michael Brown appointed Howard Croft as the Flint Department of Public Works (DPW) Director. Croft was the “point man” for the Flint River switch, tasked with disseminating lies to an angry public and covering up the widespread scope of the lead problem.

Croft, a former General Motors electrician and CEO of the now-defunct Mid-Michigan Solar company, was placed in charge of a wide swath of city departments, as part of Brown’s plan to combine positions in the city in order to cut costs. Departments under Croft’s control included Parks and Recreation, Street Maintenance, Water and Sewer, Sanitation, Planning, Fleet and Community and Economic Development.

Nearly a full year before the plans were finalized to sever Flint’s connection to the DWSD, Croft sent a letter to Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) officials, stating that the KWA “has the potential to be a major factor in our region’s economic development...The City of Flint is pleased to be a partner in the process and we pledge to offer our assets to support the development. We appreciate your technical support as we develop our components of the project.”

As public outrage mounted over the crisis, Croft held a series of public meetings aimed at obfuscating the major issues and convincing the public that the increasingly toxic water was fine. He publicly blamed the bacterial outbreaks on the aging Flint water infrastructure, but denied that the Flint River water had anything to do with it. He claimed that officials were working behind the scenes to resolve the water issues and repeatedly

tried to reassure the public that the water was safe to drink, even as furious residents shouted him down at public meetings while holding up jugs of filthy brown water.

In truth, Croft, city officials, and the MDEQ were working to doctor the lead testing results, selectively sampling low-risk homes to artificially lower the lead levels and make it appear that the city was below the EPA “action level” for lead. Even as Virginia Tech scientists were finding that nearly one in five Flint homes had “serious” levels of lead, Croft was emailing MDEQ officials to announce that their tests showed Flint was in compliance with the Safe Drinking Water Act.

In November 2015, shortly after newly-elected Mayor Karen Weaver took office, Croft resigned. He insists that responsibility lies with the MDEQ, and that he relied on the agency’s “guidance” throughout the crisis. Weeks after he left office, Croft’s office was suspiciously “burgled” and files relating to the city water system went missing. The culprit has yet to be discovered.

Michigan Department of Environmental Quality Director Dan Wyant

In 2011, Governor Snyder appointed Dan Wyant to the position of MDEQ Director. Despite serving as the head of an organization nominally tasked with preserving environmental quality, Wyant played an active and filthy role in the crisis, directly engaging in the criminal effort to force a polluted water supply onto residents without corrosion control.

Wyant formerly served as president and CEO of the Cassopolis-based Edward Lowe Foundation, which provides capital to “growth-oriented firms” in the name of “economic growth and community development.” Before joining the MDEQ, he served as director of the Michigan Department of Agriculture under both Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm and Republican Governor John Engler.

Under Wyant’s stewardship, the MDEQ became largely oriented toward rubber-stamping the operations of big industrial polluters, regardless of their effect on the environment. The organization’s rewritten mission statement listed, as its second “guiding principle,” its intention to be “partners in economic development.” Wyant repeatedly sounded off on the need for Michigan to grow its “economic garden” with tax breaks for big business and the encouragement of fracking operations.

It was Wyant who gave the unheard-of mandate that corrosion control was not necessary in the treatment of Flint River water. The lack of treatment caused the corrosive water to strip away the scale buildup that had protected the pipes from lead leaching. This criminal decision has since been presented by Wyant and other MDEQ officials as merely a “confusion” about Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) rules regarding corrosion control treatment.

Wyant repeatedly insisted that Flint’s water was safe to drink, even though his office was well aware of evidence linking the Flint River to the outbreak of Legionellosis, as well as a memo authored by EPA’s Miguel Del Toral describing evidence of severe lead contamination due to the lack of corrosion control. The day after that memo was written, an MDEQ official contacted Flint DPW officials instructing them to selectively sample low-risk homes for lead, in order to ensure that the city’s overall lead testing came in below the federal action level.

Wyant’s organization was at the forefront of the coverup, vilifying and silencing those who attempted to expose the devastating effects of the lead crisis. MDEQ spokesman Brad Wurfel claimed in a July 2015 email, “The bottom line is that the residents of Flint do not need to worry about lead in their water supply, and DEQ’s recent sampling does not indicate an eminent [sic] health threat.” He later stated in an NPR interview that Del Toral’s memo was the work of a “rogue employee,” and that Virginia Tech researchers were merely “pull[ing] that rabbit out of the hat everywhere they go.”

Both Wyant and Wurfel resigned from their posts in December 2015, as officials sought to contain public anger over the crisis. A

Snyder-appointed task force found the MDEQ to be “primarily responsible for failing to ensure safe drinking water in Flint.”

Utilities Administrator Michael Glasgow

Despite the far-reaching extent of the criminal conspiracy to sever Flint’s connection to the DWSD and draw Flint River water into the system, only a handful of low-level officials have thus far faced indictment for their role in the crisis. Among them is Michael Glasgow, a laboratory and water quality supervisor for the City of Flint who had tried to warn officials that the Flint Water Treatment plant was unprepared to treat Flint River water.

Glasgow has worked for the City of Flint since 2005. He was a water expert during the time that the city was drawing DWSD water, and was in charge of the Flint Water Treatment Plant at the time that the city made the switch to the Flint River.

The treatment plant was woefully inadequate for the task of treating a high volume of heavily-polluted Flint River water. It had been virtually mothballed for years, serving only as an emergency backup for interruptions in DWSD service (DWSD water is treated at a Lake Huron treatment plant before it reaches any of its customers). The KWA had no intention of paying for upgrades to the plant as part of its deal with Flint, and the money invested by the city was not nearly enough to prepare the plant for full-time operation.

On April 17, 2014, tasked with operating an ancient water treatment plant with a skeleton crew of untrained technicians, Glasgow wrote an email to MDEQ official Adam Rosenthal, stating, “If water is distributed from this plant in the next couple of weeks, it will be against my direction. I need time to adequately train additional staff and to update our monitoring plans before I will feel we are ready. I will reiterate this to management above me, but they seem to have their own agenda.”

Glasgow’s warning was apparently ignored, and corrosive Flint River water was soon running through the city’s system.

Glasgow was one of the officials tasked with manipulating the lead sample results by sampling low-risk homes and then doctoring reports to say that the homes had lead service lines, even if they did not. This allowed officials to include low-risk homes in their lead testing results and artificially lower the city’s overall lead levels.

Glasgow was charged with tampering with evidence, a charge that carries up to a four year prison sentence, as well as “willful neglect of office.” He has since accepted a plea deal that will require him to continue to cooperate with the investigation.

Glasgow maintained that the orders to doctor the test results came from above, and that he did not have the authority to override them. The special prosecutor appointed to investigate the crisis compared this to Nazi officers claiming they were only “following orders” during the Nuremberg war crimes trials.

As for the officials who actually issued the orders, none have yet faced indictment as of this writing.

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