

Flint water crisis claims its youngest Legionnaires' victim to date

“Her failing health was due to the government failing her”

By Sheila Brehm
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The funeral for one of the youngest victims of Legionnaires' disease was held Sunday in Flint, Michigan. Jassmine McBride, only 30 years old, contracted the deadly lung disease at the height of the Flint water crisis in 2014. Her death brings the total to 13 people who have died from it. The disease infected at least 90 people.

During a routine visit to McLaren Flint Hospital to treat diabetes in August 2014, when Jassmine was just 26 years old, she was diagnosed with Legionnaires' disease. According to a local news report at the time, Jassmine's mother Jacqueline was devastated and shocked: “The hospital called and said, ‘Do we have permission to resuscitate your daughter?’ I couldn't understand what happened. She just went to get an iron supplement.”

The bacteria had attacked her lungs, leaving her with very little ability to take in sufficient oxygen to live. At that time, Jassmine spent two months heavily sedated in the intensive care unit. Her life was changed forever. Before contracting Legionnaires', she was a young woman who was active in the band at Central High School, loved to dance and enjoyed singing in her church choir. Although she became unable to physically attend college, she was a determined young woman and began taking online classes to become a medical biller. Before her death, she was permanently tied to an oxygen tank and home-bound.

In an interview with a local reporter in May 2018, Jassmine noted that not one trial had taken place for those accused of not alerting the public about the outbreaks of Legionnaires', although many preliminary hearings had been going on in Flint for several months. Addressing those responsible, she said, “You messed up someone's future. You interfered with someone who wanted to help people, and you have innocent children who won't even

be able to experience life. There is hatred, and I'm upset because it's somebody's life they took. I want to take their life and put them in my shoes to see what I'm going through.”

In October 2018, a report about the survivors of Legionnaires' described how Jassmine's condition had worsened: “She has lesions on her face and neck, tubes coming out of her, and she can barely walk without crutches. She wonders if she will ever lead a normal life.”

Jassmine was the victim of the largest public health disaster in American history. The poisoning of residents and its cover-up was set into motion by the deliberate policies of Democratic and Republican politicians at all levels of government. With the goal of making money from the new private Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA), the safe Detroit/Lake Huron water source used in Flint for 50 years was switched to the toxic Flint River in April 2014. Corrosion control chemicals were not added to the antiquated water treatment plant.

The untreated water not only poisoned the population with lead, but it also contributed to two significant spikes of Legionnaires' disease, in June 2014 and May 2015. The failure to properly treat the water created ideal growth conditions for the deadly legionella bacteria. “Assessment of Legionnaires' disease outbreak in Flint,” a study published in 2018 by the National Academy of Sciences, clearly established the link between the deadly disease and the water.

The study found: “The results indicate that the risk of a Flint resident contracting Legionnaires' disease increased 6.3-fold following water supply changes in Flint in 2014. Moreover, decreasing concentrations of free chlorine in the water were associated with increased risk of developing Legionnaires' disease; the risk increased by 80 percent per 1 mg/L decrease in free chlorine during the

water supply change. The outbreak constitutes one of the largest Legionnaires outbreaks in the United States, and coincided with the water source and treatment changes to the system supplying drinking water to Flint.”

Florlisa Fowler, a Flint resident who has been active since the beginning of the water crisis, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*. “I want to give my condolences to Jassmine McBride’s family and friends and our true heartfelt wishes that her voice is carried on,” she said. “And, I want to reiterate that the lead scenario is only one piece of the problem that was created in Flint. There is still bacteria and unknown chemicals that run through the entire system. There are sewerage issues that have as yet to be addressed. Until we stand up with the working class of the US and internationally and fight to resolve the issue of failing infrastructure, it will continue to worsen.

“We must press on and let those voices such as Jassmine’s be heard. She let it be known that her failing health was due to the government failing her.

“It’s almost five years since the water switch, when our government decided to switch from the Detroit water source to the Flint River, yet none of the issues which are affecting our health have been addressed. Now people are starting to pass away, and we ask who will be next?”

Rick Snyder, governor at the time and other government officials did not acknowledge the Legionnaires’ outbreaks until January 2016. Florlisa added, “If they had warned people, we could have prevented sickness. They covered it up and people suffered and people died.”

Decades of deindustrialization have left the birthplace of General Motors and the historic sit-down strike littered with closed auto plants and toxic dumps. “We are now discovering the sites that General Motors left to Racer Trust are contaminating the ground water and affecting the entire area,” Florlisa said. “I would be shocked if anyone like Snyder or the emergency managers were brought to trial and held accountable. I don’t ever foresee it happening.

“The crisis still exists. There’s no superman or superwoman coming to save us. It’s going to take us, the average workers all over the world. It’s not the officials, it’s us.”

It remains unclear how many people in Flint actually contracted Legionnaires’ disease at the height of the Flint water crisis, since the symptoms mirror pneumonia. There was a dramatic increase in pneumonia deaths in Flint after the 2014 switch. A recent PBS Frontline investigation suggests that some of the 119 deaths from pneumonia during the time the city relied on Flint River water should

likely be attributed to Legionnaires’ disease. The tally is based on an extensive review of death records and interviews with epidemiologists and other scientists who are experts in the field of infectious diseases. If the death toll is higher, as the records and interviews suggest, a 15-month delay by state officials in notifying the community about the legionella outbreak may have cost even more lives.

The death of Jassmine McBride and the circumstances that led to this tragedy illustrate the conditions that persist in Flint nearly five years since the onset of the water crisis. A social crime has been committed by a financial aristocracy that has spent the past half-century plundering the country and neglecting its social and physical infrastructure while accumulating unimaginable sums of personal wealth.

Writing in his 1845 work, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Friedrich Engels condemned the British ruling class for “social murder” due to the fetid water supplies, cramped housing, and disease that afflicted working-class districts in Manchester and other cities:

“When society places hundreds of proletarians in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death, one which is quite as much a death by violence as that by the sword or bullet; when it deprives thousands of the necessaries of life, places them under conditions in which they cannot live—forces them, through the strong arm of the law, to remain in such conditions until that death ensues which is the inevitable consequence—knows that these thousands of victims must perish, and yet permits these conditions to remain, its deed is murder just as surely as the deed of the single individual.”

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