TO PARENTS WORRIED ABOUT LEAD POISONING:

Help is on the way for Flint kids

Health experts offer testing, guidance and other services

By Robin Erb
Detroit Free Press

To the panicked parents in Flint: Help is on the way.
That's the message from doctors, university researchers and public health officials mobilizing to move an embattled city beyond shock and anger over its toxic water to a brighter next chapter — one that involves wrapping services around Flint's children to protect them from the worst effects of the lead that streamed through the city's water lines.

"This is somewhat of an unprecedented situation. Usually when we talk about elevated blood-lead levels, it's about an individual child or an individual family situation. Here you have a large, communal source of lead," said Dr. Dean Sienko, associate dean for public health at Michigan State University's College of Human Medicine, which is helping lead the effort.

While lead poisoning cannot be reversed, experts say that the right kind of nutrition, parenting and community services can mitigate the worst damage: learning disabilities, speech deficits and severe brain damage in children.

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Critics link emergency manager law to Flint crisis

By Paul Egan
Detroit Free Press

LANSING — Michigan's emergency manager law, already highly controversial because it was rejected by voters in 2012 but reinstated by Republican lawmakers less than six weeks later, is under fresh scrutiny in light of the lead contamination of Flint's drinking water.

Flint was under the control of a state-appointed emergency manager when it began drawing water from the Flint River as a cost-saving measure last year. Tests show the corrosive nature of the river water caused lead in the pipes that deliver it to homes and other structures to leech into the drinking water, causing it to exceed federal limits for lead — which can cause permanent brain damage in children.

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Help is on the way for Flint kids and worried parents

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harbor problems in the coming years.

With guidance in part, from a

group known as the Flint Lead

Action Team, the Michigan Department of

Health and Human Services is

expected to send letters this

week to families recommend-

ing they talk to their child’s
doctor about immediate lead
testing and long-term monitor-
in for developmental prob-

lems, as well as to discuss

nutrition, since certain foods can

reduce the absorption of lead.

Among other steps under

discussion:

— More lead assessments and
distributions to pediatric offices.

— Develop a phone app for

Flint residents that would

remind them of the

importance of screening and

even promote healthy choices.

— Boost enrollment in federal

programs such as Women, Infants,

children and Children’s PCC and

Double Up Food Bucks, which

give low-income families ac-

cess to fresh produce.

— Increase age- and sex-

screening to monitor kids for
devotional delays, lead

school-based blood-lead

screening programs and boost

enrollment in Early Head Start and

Head Start programs to give

kids who may struggle with

learning disabilities an ac-
demic boost before they start

school.

— Expand home visiting pro-

grams, in which health care

providers visit high-risk families,

in part, to monitor children de-

veloping lead-related health

issues or mental health

issues.

The crisis comes as a result of

a series of Flint officials ending

the city’s water contract with

Detroit in 2014, starting tests

on lead and copper in the

water that are now monitored

by the Flint Department of

Public Health and the state

health department.

Consequences began almost

immediately.

Lead levels in children’s blood

and in adults’ blood rose

almost immediately after the

change in water supplier.

With the change in water

source, the water in Flint’s

water system changed, and

the city’s public health

officials have been working

to keep the city’s water system

safe ever since.

Flint’s water system is a

complex network of pipes,

tanks, and treatment plants.

The city’s water system

was designed to deliver

clean, safe water to residents.

Flint’s water system is

important to the health of

residents, and the city’s

public health officials are

working to ensure that it

remains safe.

The health effects of lead

exposure in children include

decreased IQ, attention def-

deficit/hyperactivity disorder,

and decreased academic per-

formance.

In adults, lead exposure can

cause memory loss, decreased

IQ, and decreased work perfor-

mance.

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from lead poisoning because she used bottled water for her formula and she cooked using filtered tap water.

But then again...

The filter is getting old, June Kyger, 25, notes. What should she get a new one? She has heard there are free filters, but who has the best ones?

And what about lead testing for 18-month-old Kaden? Who does that testing?

He seems fine — but then again...

The worries “every single day” are compounded by a sense of helplessness, said Kyger, who moved back to Flint earlier this year after several years away. “I don’t really know my way around (city services) like I used to.”

And some parents still aren’t aware of the problem at all. Or they don’t know help is available.

For every two clients served in the WIC program, it’s estimated there is another eligible client who is not enrolled, said Mark Valaцak, Genesee County’s health officer.

“We have some very hard-to-reach populations,” he said.

’Very, very unusual’

There’s a symbiosis in this kind of public health initiative, too.

As researchers and doctors help residents navigate the years ahead, they will gather information from medical exams, cord blood testing of newborns, a review of low-weight births and miscarriages, results of water testing and geo-mapping of the hardest-hit areas. And that, in turn, will guide future public health efforts.

“What has happened in Flint is very, very unusual. They have essentially conducted an uncontrolled experiment, in that they corroded the lead out of these lead pipes,” said Wayne State University lead expert Shara McKimmary, who last weekend was in Flint testing water in homes just 48 hours after the city switched back to Detroit water. Secondarily to helping Flint’s residents, Flint’s crisis can offer important lessons to other cities relying on aging infrastructure, he said.

Testing over the coming years will offer insight into how well the infrastructure recovery.

All of this, though, will take work to shift the conversation from finger-pointing to something more productive, said Jeffrey Dwyer, a senior associate dean at MSU’s College of Human Medicine which already was positioned in Flint to work with the community. Funded by a $9-million grant from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, its researchers are focused on the public health problems that Flint residents identified as their most pressing: chronic disease, behavioral health and healthy behaviors.

Let others call for the investigations when it comes to the water issues, Dwyer said — for public health, the most immediate task is buffering Flint’s families from the worst effects of lead.

“We can all do the finger-pointing, but at the end of the day, there are people who need our help and we have an obligation to figure out how to provide that,” he said.

“We need to give parents hope, and we can do that. We need to help them build resilience for their kids.”

DR. MONA HANNA-ATTISHA, program director of the pediatric residency program at the Hurley Medical Center in Flint.

Contact Robin Erik
rerk@freepress.com or 313-222-2709
Follow her on Twitter @freephealth.