HELP IS COMING FOR PARENTS OF LEAD-EXPOSED FLINT CHILDREN

Officials mobilizing to protect kids from effects

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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 to 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 behavior problems in the coming years.

With guidance, in part, from a group known as the Flint Lead Innovation Team, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services is expected to send letters this week to families rec-
ommending they talk to their child’s doc-
tor about immediate lead testing and long-term monitoring for developmental
problems, as well as focusing on nutri-
tion, since certain foods can reduce the
absorption of lead.
Among the other steps under discus-
sion are moving nutritionists and dieti-
tians to pediatric offices and health clin-
ics; boosting enrollment in federal pro-
grams such as Women, Infants, and
Children (WIC) and Double Up Food
Bucks, which give low-income families
access to fresh produce; increasing
screening to monitor kids for develop-
mental delays; launching school-based
stress-reduction programs; boosting en-
rollment in Early Head Start and Head
Start programs to give kids who may
struggle with learning disabilities an
academic boost before they start school;
and expanding home visiting programs
in which health care and social workers
meet with families, in part, to monitor
children for developing learning dis-
abilities and other health problems.

The crisis came about as a result of
Flint officials ending the city’s water
contract with Detroit in 2014, saying
costs were too high and opting instead
to join the Karegnondi Water Authority,
which is building a system to supply
Glenmont County with water from Lake
Huron. But with that system not coming
on line until next year, Flint decided in
the interim to pull water from the Flint
River and treat it at its own facility.
Complaints began almost immediately;
last month, according to Dr. Mona Hanna-
Attisha, a Hurley Children’s Center pedi-
atrian, a为导向 dangerous spike in
children’s blood-lead levels, corroborat-
ing water testing results earlier this year
by a Virginia Tech researcher.
Amid accusations of a failure to prop-
ern, waterway officials say it was a
cover-up, but on Friday reconnected the
Detroit wa-
ter system. But it may take a few weeks
to completely flush the system.
“We need to give parents hope, and we
can do that,” said Hanna-Attisha, who
is now also helping lead a team of doctors
and researchers. “We need to help them
build resilience for their kids.”

Just down the hallway from Hanna-
Attisha’s office in the new, colorful-
ly bright Hurley clinic in downtown,
Jani
ka Owens and Demario Stewart last
week carried in their two-month-old son,
Damonei, for a routine check-up. He was
measured and weighed. Medical staff
checked to make sure bones and organs
are developing normally, even though
lead poisoning’s effects won’t show up
this early.

That leaves Damonei’s parents won-
dering.

Although they’ve used bottled water
for his formula, Owens at times had
cooked with Flint water while she was
pregnant. She’d brushed her teeth with
it.

Lead can pass across the placenta to
a fetus, studies have shown.

Who would ever think you couldn’t
trust — of all things — water?
“I never thought I’d have to deal with
this — ever,” Demario Stewart said, try-
ing to soothe his increasingly w议论
fant. “Ill never trust my water again.”

Hanna-Attisha says she sees parents
streaming in almost every day in recent
weeks — parents who wonder how much
lead their children have ingested.
And about whether their child has irrepa-
rible brain damage. And whether it will
one day trigger the kind of learning or
behavior problems that can set a life per-
manently off course.

“They wonder: ‘Did I protect my baby’
‘Did I trust too much?” she said.
It’s a grudging, toxic stress that finds
access points in everyday inconven-
iences. Is the restaurant coffee made
from Flint River water? Are the filters
on the public drinking faucets ade-
quate? Will the babysitter be as vigilant
in getting bottled water? Is this a passing
headache or something more perma-
nent?

Last week, Kaden Kyger’s tiny fin-
gers and face were slathered in straw-
berry yogurt as the toddler chased the
family cats around the living room of
their home. His mother believes he has
been spared from lead poisoning be-
cause she used bottled water for his for-
formula and she cooked using filtered tap
water.

But then again...
The filter is getting old, June Kyger,
25, notes. When 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
16-
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 ear-
lier 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 an-
other eligible client who is not enrolled,
said Mark Valacak, Genesee County’s
health officer.

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

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