Flint Tallies Tainted Water’s Cost to Its Children

By ABBY GOODNOUGH

FLINT, Mich. — Quayana Towns’s 2-month-old daughter wriggled on an exam table last week as her pediatrician ticked off questions that have become essential for every parent of young children here.

“So what are you guys doing for water — what are you drinking?” asked the doctor, Mona Hanna-Attisha.

“I have a whole bunch of bottled water that I picked up,” said Ms. Towns, 26, assuring the doctor that the family had been drinking it for a few months, since the gravity of Flint’s water crisis came to light.

“And before that you were using tap water?”

“Yeah,” Ms. Towns replied, as her other child, a 1-year-old, King, toddled around.

Dr. Hanna-Attisha would waste no time adding King and his sister, Taeyana, to a new database of children under 6 who may have been exposed to lead in Flint’s water, a group she said she believes could number 8,000.

Of all the concerns raised by the contamination of Flint’s water supply, and the failure of the state and federal governments to promptly address the crisis after it began nearly two years ago, none is more chilling than the possibility that children in this tattered city may have suffered irreversible damage to their developing brains and nervous systems from exposure to lead.

Residents and advocates have expressed outrage over the government’s failure to protect Flint’s children, something many of them say would not have happened if the city were largely white. Adding to their injury, they say, are the harsh conditions of poverty that have already placed obstacles in their young lives.

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Quayna Tookshans took photographs as Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha examined her daughter, Teyana, in Flint, Mich., on Jan. 20.

Younger children are especially vulnerable to the irreversible effects of exposure.

The doctors here say they will focus on improving the diet of Flint’s entire population and expanding education programs like Head Start, the federally funded preschool program for low-income children, which already has a waiting list in Flint. Dr. Hanna-Attisha has submitted dozens of recommendations to the governor, state legislators and federal officials.

It remains a wish list at this point, but she and others believe that with Flint’s public health crisis in the national spotlight, the city’s chances of getting help are better than ever before.

Mr. Snyder and the State Legislature have so far allocated $5.5 million in emergency state spending for Flint. Some of the money will provide initial services, such as environmental assessments and home visits from nurses, to lead-exposed children. Mr. Snyder has also asked the federal government to expand Medicaid to cover every Flint resident younger than 21, regardless of income level. And Democrats in Congress have said Thursday that they would seek $300 million in federal aid for Michigan to help Flint.

Local philanthropic groups have set up a charitable fund with the goal of improving health outcomes for children exposed to lead, including through Dr. Hanna-Attisha’s project, the Pediatric Public Health Initiative. Pharmacists, nutritionists and child development experts are among the participants in the project, which Hurley is overseeing with the University of Michigan’s College of Human Medicine, where Dr. Hanna-Attisha is an assistant professor of pediatrics.

“We have a unique opportunity to build a model public health program here,” Dr. Hanna-Attisha said. “We have to throw every single evidence-based resource at these kids, starting now.”