



Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, head of the Pediatric Public Health Initiative, examines Isabella Evans at Hurley Children's Center. Hanna-Attisha is helping youth and families recover from Flint's water crisis.

From Hurt to Healing

Doctor leads charge to create healthier future for Flint's kids

By E. B. Allen

For Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha the work has just begun.

Widely celebrated as a heroine for her role in exposing the public health issue stemming from Flint's lead-contaminated municipal water system, she has entrenched herself in the next stage of providing professional care.

"I was just doing my job," Hanna-Attisha says of her efforts to show evidence of lead poisoning.

The most important job ahead is healing, she says.

Hanna-Attisha heads the Pediatric Public Health Initiative (PPHI), a joint venture between Hurley Children's Hospital and

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Michigan State University's College of Human Medicine and other academic departments at MSU. Launched early this year, the multi-faceted strategy unites experts in psychology, nutrition, education, geography and other areas with the goal of promoting quality lives for Flint's youth.

There might be long-term health and other development issues ahead for

families impacted by lead exposure, some which could even affect future generations.

The priority right now is to properly test and identify those children with lead levels that require immediate intervention and longer-term care.

PPHI aims to impact the community's future through its collaborative plan, which includes beginning cognitive and behavioral development assessments scheduled for 10,000 children this fall. It will make recommendations for supplemental support, medical and otherwise, based on the screening results.

Primarily focused on students younger than six, participants will include youth from the Flint Community Schools and the Genesee Intermediate School District. County health partners will conduct studies to help identify any developmental and behavioral deficits.

Besides the well-documented physical sickness and side effects of poisoning, lead can impact everything from attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder to impulse behavioral issues as children grow up, Hanna-Attisha says.

With so much at stake, it's important that the community, which pulled together in the early days of the crisis, stay together through recovery, according to the doctor, who is a leading advocate of community collaboration and cooperation.

"Flint is a small big city," says Hanna-Attisha. "You can get everybody who

cares about certain things at the table, so our community has been working together around these initiatives."

Along with "amazing churches and community organizations" supporting PPHI, the Greater Flint Health Coalition

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is an ally, and United Way "has been absolutely incredible," she says.

The blessing in disguise that resulted from one of Flint's most significant challenges has been a great harvest of neighborhood, philanthropic and governmental resources the city lacked for too long.

"We used to have one school nurse in Flint Community Schools. Now we have 10 school nurses in Flint. It is amazing. And these are things our kids have needed for decades," she says.

Even recreational opportunities have increased, such as YMCA- and arts agency-sponsored summer camps, things that make kids feel "regular."

"If any kids need to feel regular, they're our Flint kids," says Hanna-Attisha. "So we are attacking this on many fronts.

We're trying to evaluate everything we do, so we can share that information with other communities."

Dr. Aron Sousa, interim dean of the College of Human Medicine, says PPHI moves beyond sterile fact-gathering and data interpretation.

"We're not focused so much on cataloguing problems or biopsying a community," he says. "That's been done for a long time. We're interested in demonstrating how strategies might work."

"Health and academic institutions are a core part of the scientific safety net of a community," says Sousa. "That's particularly powerful when science brings to light the problems that a community faces."

The program's efforts encompass advocacy for early literacy and expanded pre-kindergarten education. A key approach, Sousa says, is added outreach into the lives of parents and grandparents who care for young people.

Even for lead-exposed boys and girls, future behavioral issues and cognitive problems are not a foregone conclusion, but PPHI's offerings are "things we'd wish for all of our children," Sousa says.

Given what Flint has suffered, both known and yet to be revealed, no amount of remedial support will ever be enough, Hanna-Attisha says. But her vision is clear.

"My focus is tomorrow," she says. "I care about the kids and what we do next."