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What Will Happen to Flint's Lead-Poisoned Children?

The effects of lead poisoning on young brains are irreversible and untreatable.

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01.14.16 12:44 PM ET

“I love Flint, I am Flint, I do community work in Flint, but if there’s one thing that can actually drive me from Michigan right now, it’s this water,” said Chia Morgan.

Morgan, a social worker and mother of a 3-year-old daughter, has lived in the Flint area her entire life but she may soon leave the state for fear of lead poisoning.

After the city began using the Flint River as a drinking water supply in 2014, the incidence of elevated blood lead levels among Flint children under age 5 nearly doubled from 2.1 percent to 4 percent, according to research led by Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha at the Hurley Medical Center and released in September of last year.

Now, an email obtained by NBC News shows that an epidemiologist notified the state about an increase in Flint kids’ lead levels as early as July of last year.

Morgan’s first whiff of trouble came when she picked her daughter up from their Flint babysitter’s house and thought the water in the home “smelled funny.” Other residents have described the water as looking “like urine” and smelling “like the sewer” or “fishy.” Morgan’s daughter, thankfully, has had normal blood test results so far but the concerned mother doesn’t want to take any chances.

“I’m actually contemplating leaving,” Morgan told The Daily Beast. “Water? That’s a basic necessity. And if I can’t drink that here... I can’t help others if I can’t keep my own family safe here.”

Flint has been embroiled in a years-long water crisis that will have long-lasting and, for some, life-altering consequences.

In 2014, the impoverished city stopped buying water from Detroit but residents still needed a potable supply while awaiting the construction of a pipeline to Lake

Huron. Sourcing water from the Flint River was seen as an affordable option but investigators now know that, after the switch, the highly corrosive river water leached lead from pipes into people's homes. Flint Mayor Karen Weaver has said that it could cost as much as $1.5 billion to repair the city's water infrastructure.

Last week, in response to months of complaints, Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder declared a state of emergency. This Wednesday, he activated the National Guard to distribute clean water to Flint residents and asked for aid from FEMA. The blame, the litigation, and the investigations are all underway.

In November, the EPA announced that it would investigate whether the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) violated the Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA) by not treating the Flint River water with an anti-corrosive agent before sending it through the system. And at the end of the year, MDEQ head Dan Wyant resigned after an independent task force faulted his agency's handling of the situation.

But as the crisis continues, some in the community are soberly turning their attention to the future: Now that the damage has been done, what will happen to the next generation of Flint kids?

Lower IQ. Learning problems. Slowed growth. Inability to pay attention. These are a few of the long-term effects that lead poisoning can have on children, according to the EPA and the CDC. Other effects include anemia and hyperactivity.

Lead harms adults, too, but as the World Health Organization (WHO) notes in a special report on childhood lead poisoning, the effects of lead on young brains are "untreatable and irreversible." In populations that have had widespread exposure to lead, the WHO report notes, "there results a substantial increase in the number of children with diminished intelligence and mental retardation" accompanied by

"a substantial reduction in the number of children with truly superior intelligence."

In the U.S., waterborne lead on the scale of Flint's current crisis is not unprecedented. In 2004, *The Washington Post* drew attention to high levels of lead in D.C.'s water supply. The CDC initially minimized the severity of the crisis but, after an independent 2009 study found that as many as 42,000 children had been put at risk, a congressional review prompted the CDC to label its earlier reporting as "misleading."

The effects of lead on large populations can be slow to manifest. As Dr. Hanna-Attisha's team noted when first presenting on Flint's lead crisis, some children may be "asymptomatic now" but that doesn't mean they won't face problems later.

"If there was ever a time to invest in our children, it is now," Dr. Hanna-Attisha said in a press release for the Community Foundation of Greater Flint (CFGF), which is now asking for nationwide donations to the Flint Child Health and Development Fund to help cover the short- and long-term costs of the crisis.

In conjunction with a committee of residents and community organizations, the fund will be used to provide social services, early childhood education, behavioral health services, and more to Flint kids. Community organizations will be seeking government funding throughout this crisis, too, but at this point, charitable giving may indeed be one of Flint's best bets.

The state of Michigan's Early On program for developmentally disabled and delayed children may not be prepared for an influx of lead-poisoned Flint kids, says Matt Gillard, president and CEO of the policy advocacy organization Michigan's Children. In an op-ed for the *Flint Journal* last week, Gillard called for increased state funding to Early On, noting that elevated blood lead levels are an eligibility factor for inclusion in the program.

“The children of Flint will need more than new declarations of emergency, state-level resignations, and public apologies to help reverse the damage that has been done to their young bodies and developing brains,” Gillard wrote.

Already, he says, Flint parents are discovering the limitations of the state-run program.

“What’s undoubtedly going to happen, and what’s already happening in Flint, is that more kids are identified as being eligible [for Early On] but the resources to provide the services that these kids need are not there,” he told The Daily Beast.

Michigan relies on federal special education funding, provided under Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), to keep the Early On program afloat.

Based on a recent audit, however, that source of Early On funding wasn’t sufficient for Michigan even before the Flint water crisis.

In 2013, the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) and school districts statewide told the Office of the Michigan Auditor General that a lack of funding was restricting the number and quality of early intervention (EI) services they could provide to developmentally disabled and delayed children.

“MDE informed us that, in the past, there were many EI services available throughout the State with funding sources other than IDEA-Part C,” the audit reads.

But those additional wells of money dried up, the audit notes. Other funding sources “diminished” and school districts “had to pay for these services with IDEA Part-C funds or other locally derived funding if they wished to continue to provide them.” Without additional money, many school districts dropped EI services or replaced “specialized clinical staff” with “nonspecialists to train parents to understand and address their children’s developmental delays.”

“A common concern expressed by the [school districts] that we visited was a lack of funding for EI services,” the audit notes.

More worrying was the inaction they uncovered at the time: “Although MDE recognized a lack of funding as a significant problem confronting Early On, MDE informed us that it has been several years since it has attempted to obtain direct State General Fund support for Early On.”

As of October 2015, Michigan’s Children noted in a policy memo, the state still did not invest money upfront in EI services.

While Flint residents face a shortage of clean drinking water, then, another shortage lies in wait for their poisoned children—a lack of funding for services that many of them could soon need. In a city where 41.5 percent of residents live below the poverty line—and where those residents currently have to use bottled water to brush their teeth—there are more urgent concerns in the coming days than the education budget.

But once the water runs clear again, the fate of Flint’s kids will still rest in the state’s hands. Many parents, like Morgan, will face that future and think of leaving.