

Trenton officials say water is safe from lead, but warn of other issues



Exterior of the Trenton Water Filtration Plant on Wednesday, July 15, 2015. TRENTONIAN FILE PHOTO

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TRENTON >> The head of the capital city's Water Works department assured residents that Trenton's water quality is better than Flint's.

Flint's water crisis has gained national attention due to the water being contaminated with high levels of lead.

"It's been a pretty hot topic thanks to our friends in Flint," Trenton Water Works General Superintendent Joseph McIntyre said at Thursday's council meeting during a forum on the topic. "The good news is here in Trenton it's not a hot topic as it pertains to water. We've never had a lead-based problem here in the water."

McIntyre explained that Trenton's water system was built differently than some of the older towns, and that lead was "not as prevalent" in Trenton.

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“We don’t have lead-lined water mains,” the Trenton Water Works official said. “Our sourced water from the Delaware River is of a very high quality. We don’t have a lead issue.”

Though McIntyre said water can be delivered to homes by the city lead-free or with less than detectable levels, there can still be an issue when it gets there.

Houses with older plumbing and lead-based solder, which was used through the mid-1980s, can cause some issues, he said.

“It’s never good to consume water that’s been laying in pipes for extended periods of time,” McIntyre said about residents who don’t use a faucet for eight to 10 hours. “When you come home and if you’re going to drink from your tap, run the water long enough that you can feel that colder temperature change. That’s an indication that you’ve pulled in new water from the water main.”

But water is not the only area of concern.

Lead-based paint was used in many homes until it was banned in 1978.

“Most of the houses in this city were built before 1978,” Elyse Pivnick, Isles’ director of environmental health, said at the meeting.

Pivnick, who’s worked on the issue nationally and locally for the past decade, estimates 90 percent of the homes in Trenton have a risk of having lead paint.

Substandard conditions, such as water damage, holes in the wall, or old windows, can generate lead paint dust, she said.

Sharing statistics, the Isles director said 15 percent of Trenton children entering kindergarten in 2012 had blood lead levels at or greater than 5 mg/dL, the reference level used by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

New Jersey, however, adheres to a level of 10 mg/dL or higher, which Pivnick called outdated. James Brownlee, Trenton’s health director, reported 2.5 percent of the city children tested at the 10 mg/dL level in 2015. He said 134 children out of the 5,310 tested were found to have elevated blood lead levels.

“All the research shows us that there are very serious consequences at 5 mg/dL and above,” Pivnick said. “At 5 mg/dL, 30 percent of children are more likely to fail third grade reading and math tests, and more likely to not be proficient in science, math and reading.”

Citing a study, the Isles director said even at levels as low as 4 mg/dL, there’s an increased likelihood of the child forming a learning disability.

Pivnick also said children are mandated to be tested twice between the ages of 1 and 2, but there are no

enforcement measures to require it.

“Most children are only tested once,” she said, noting the test at 2 years old is important due to the possibility of more lead exposure.

And though it may be shocking to some, Trenton children under 6 had higher blood lead levels than children in Flint.

According to a Childhood Lead Poisoning 2014 annual report by the New Jersey Department of Health, Trenton and 12 other municipal agencies in the state had a higher percentage of children under the age of six with elevated blood lead levels than children in Flint.

According to the data, 214 out of the 3,421 Trenton children examined, or 6.3 percent, tested with blood lead levels at or greater than 5 mg/dL. For comparison, 112 Flint children out of the 3,339 tested in 2015 received blood levels in that same range, a reduction of 3 percent from Trenton.

Dwayne Mosley, Trenton Public Schools facilities administrator, told council that lead tests were conducted at city schools.

“There were some hits that were found throughout some of the schools,” Mosley said, noting the issues with some drinking fountain and faucets were remedied. “The district has gone back and done some lead testing in those areas where we found hits that were above 15 parts per billion.”

Mosely said the district recently purchased another round of testing.

The public information workshop about lead levels was initiated by Councilman Duncan Harrison.

“I believe that the residents need to know this information as well as make sure that our water system, our housing quality and the health of the community is one of the priorities of this council and this administration,” Harrison said.

Councilwoman Marge Caldwell-Wilson said the city should look into a law, such as other cities in the U.S., to require lead safe certification before a home or rental occupancy..

“We could remove lead as a threat to Trenton in less than a generation,” Pivnick said. “We can possibly be lead safe and kids can be free of lead, ready to learn. We need to change our system. Right now, we use kids as lead detectors. Once a child has a high level, then it’s time to fix the house, and that makes no sense.”

About the Author



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