



MILWAUKEE WATER COMMONS

Drinking Water and Lead Exposure in Milwaukee: Communication and Strategic Short-Term and Long-Term Plans

Recommendations to the Common Council's Water Quality Task Force by Milwaukee Water Commons Drinking Water Initiative Team

March 8, 2017

Background

According to the City of Milwaukee, there are approximately 169,000 lead water service lines in Milwaukee. Approximately 70,000 residential properties have service lines made of lead, and about 6,000 commercial properties have lead service lines. The service line connects the water main in the street to the property. The water coming out of the treatment plant is safe but is distributed through lead pipes which are dangerous.

We can all agree that this is a serious problem. Like many problems, it is complex but we believe it is a solvable public health issue. This requires a much more robust response from our city government than we have seen. Lead is toxic to everyone. There is no safe level of lead exposure for any human being.

Over the past year, Milwaukee Water Commons has met with City officials and representatives, from the Mayor to members of the Common Council and the Health Department. The City of Milwaukee leadership has taken steps. They have organizing a Water Quality Task Force and provided a small number of free filters through community based organizations. Most importantly they passed an ordinance which prohibits partial lateral replacement and offers a funding structure that greatly reduces the potential cost to the homeowner.

The city has taken some important steps and we applaud their efforts. But at the same time, these efforts are not robust enough to solve the problem. We are imploring our public health trustees to take an assertive stance and to treat this as an urgent public health issue. We are advocating for strategic short-term and long-term plans that require a crucial communication strategy and a proactive schedule for lateral replacement to protect Milwaukee families.

Recommendations

The following are our recommendations to the Water Quality Task Force specifically, and the Common Council in general.

Messaging

The messaging around dissolved lead in drinking water needs to be clear, concise, and delivered in a culturally competent way. The messaging around this issue up to this point has been inconsistent, unclear and inadequate, not completely health-based or practical in its implementation. It is important to lay out the realities and complexities of the problem and give straight-forward solutions.

We recommend that the messages be tested for clarity and ease of implementation in focus groups. Messaging needs to be consistent across sites and all government platforms.

We recommend that these messages be shared across many mediums including radio, television, social media, and literature. Outreach through community-based organizations and faith communities will be key. For better compliance, messaging needs to be uniform and consistent across multiple platforms. The message needs to be delivered by messengers that are trusted and respected in the community, the basis of cultural competency. There should also be a speaker's bureau and a list of community organizations from which one can obtain more information or help.

Further, although there are other environmental sources of lead contamination, this campaign should focus specifically on water and lead pipes and fixtures. The community is asking for answers about drinking water and deserves a clear message addressing their concerns.

Filtration, Not Flushing

We recommend shifting from an emphasis on flushing (running water for 3 minutes, for 6 minutes, or "until cold") to a focus on filtration as a short-term solution. Filtration is a much better guarantee of safety than flushing. NSF 53-rated filters have consistently been shown to remove the levels of lead we may experience in homes in Milwaukee. They are a safe, low-cost, high-return investment.

Emphasizing flushing as a solution is inappropriate for the following reasons:

- Running water "until cold" is arbitrary and does not mean the same thing to everyone. Additionally, in the colder months, many of our homes always have cold water sitting in our pipes – this is Wisconsin, after all.
- The flushing protocol is expensive. Last fall, Milwaukee Water Works quoted \$0.16 per day as the cost of a home following the flushing protocol. We do not know how this number was generated or how much flushing it was based on. If we use \$0.16 as a conservative example, flushing 70,000 homes would add up to approximately \$4.1 million per year. Per home, this averages out to over \$58 per year. For \$58, a family could purchase a filter and replacement cartridges for an entire year.
- Flushing is wasteful of our precious water resources. As stewards of our water, we see flushing not only as wasteful, but also as harmful to our lake and its ecosystems. MMSD has made great strides encouraging conservation of water use to prevent overflows. We should not be undoing the conservation efforts they have made by adding massive amounts of water due to a flushing protocol.

- Flushing is not enough to guarantee the safety of children under the age of six and pregnant mothers, according to the Milwaukee Health Department and Milwaukee Water Works. They recommend filtration or bottled water.

The message about filtration needs to include where and how to obtain a filter. For most families, purchasing an NSF-53 water filter or pitcher is within their means. Through our research, we have found faucet-mounted filters to be available for as low as \$16. Given the information they need to make a safe choice, many families will opt for filtration. For those for whom purchasing a filter would be an undue financial burden, free filter distribution sites through the city, or community and faith groups, will be critical. Caring for our most vulnerable is a high priority, though we should not work under the assumption that the only way to get filters on faucets is to give them away. By communicating the need and the benefit, we can allow the community to rise to make healthy choices, and then provide for those who cannot afford to make that choice. We also recommend the training of technicians to assist people in filter installation and maintenance.

Lateral Replacement Planning

We recommend the city develops and implements a proactive replacement plan for all lead service laterals. While the ordinance the Common Council passed is a good start, it alone does not solve the problem. Replacing leaking laterals, laterals where water main work is scheduled, and laterals to 385 schools and daycares, barely begins to make a dent in the infrastructure problem. Though this is an expensive and extensive undertaking, a 50-year plan is not health based. We need to tap into the creative solution-making capabilities of leaders and decision-makers in our city. We believe lead laterals should be replaced within the next 15 years.

Review of Recommendations

- Messaging campaign, tested for efficacy and clarity, widely disseminated.
- Filtration as opposed to flushing (short-term solution).
- Strategic plan to replace lead laterals within 15 years (long-term solution).

In Closing

Our community should not be afraid to drink our water. We do not want people to turn to bottled water out of fear. Our drinking water is incredibly clean and a healthy choice, it only becomes unhealthy because of old lead pipes and fixtures. Bottled water is not the answer, filtration is.

Access to clean, safe drinking water is an important tenet of environmental justice. This requires the meaningful involvement of all people in our community. We need to build momentum around this issue. Community partners, existing networks and community connections can all get this message out. Assuming that our communities are resilient, and given the opportunity and information, they will be able to find solutions and overcome barriers.

There is much talk in Milwaukee of becoming a global water city. Only by inviting leadership and innovation from throughout the community can we truly grasp what it means to become a model water city in all its dimensions and activate the level of community commitment necessary for achieving that

vision. Change can come to Milwaukee's communities by organizing community residents and building community power.

About Milwaukee Water Commons

Milwaukee Water Commons (MWC) works to bring Milwaukee communities together to solve our most pressing problems around our common interest in clean, safe and healthy water. Our programs, Water City 3.0, Water School, and We Are Water work to engage people and communities – especially in low-income communities and communities of color and most likely to be affected and least likely to have resources for solutions – to educate, inspire, organize and act.

The Drinking Water initiative is but one of six initiative areas; MWC also works on Water Quality, Green Infrastructure, Blue-Green Jobs, Education & Recreation and Arts & Culture. Through public mobilization, project development, and engagement of all members of the community in developing a narrative around safe, clean and healthy water, MWC is building a coalition with the power to make change. Through this plan for collective action, MWC will give voice to the collective will of Milwaukeeans for clean, safe healthy drinking water free of lead contamination.

We appreciate the Common Council's efforts and look forward to working together on this important issue. If you have any questions or follow-up, do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

Milwaukee Water Commons

Drinking Water Initiative Team

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