

December 29, 2015

Dear Governor Snyder:

The Flint Water Advisory Task Force, which you appointed on October 21, 2015, has devoted considerable effort and countless hours to our review of the contamination of the Flint water supply: what happened, why it occurred, and what is needed to prevent a recurrence in Flint or elsewhere in the state. We have also been assessing ongoing mitigation efforts to help assure that short- and long-term public health issues and water management concerns will be properly addressed to safeguard the health and well being of the Flint community.

Shortly after we began our work, we recognized the immediate need for better coordination of the state's response to the ongoing public health issues in Flint, and for assignment of a single person to provide this coordination. We addressed these concerns in a letter to you on December 7, 2015, and you responded with immediate adoption of these recommendations. We thank you for the commitment your response demonstrates.

In our continuing efforts, we have now interviewed numerous individuals at state and local levels; reviewed many documents, articles, and emails; and deliberated repeatedly as a group. Both individually and as a group, we have visited Flint several times during the past several weeks to meet with citizens, public health officials and healthcare providers, individuals who have water management responsibilities at the city and county levels, and other public officials.

It is clear to us, particularly as we listen to the people of Flint, that it is both critical and urgent to establish responsibility for what happened in their community and to ensure accountability. This is a first step in a long process to re-establish the trust they no longer have in their government and the agencies whose responsibility it is to protect their health. It is urgent because this deep distrust of government continues to compromise the effective delivery of protective services designed to address ongoing public health issues. It is for these reasons that we are sending this letter at this time.

**We believe the primary responsibility for what happened in Flint rests with the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ). Although many individuals and entities at state and local levels contributed to creating and prolonging the problem, MDEQ is the government agency that has responsibility to ensure safe drinking water in Michigan. It failed in that responsibility and must be held accountable for that failure.**

The Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA) places responsibility for compliance with its requirements on the public water system. In this instance, the City of Flint had the responsibility to operate its water system within SDWA requirements, under the jurisdiction of the MDEQ. The role of the MDEQ is to **ensure** compliance with the SDWA through its regulatory oversight as the primary agency having enforcement responsibility for the Flint water system.

The MDEQ failed in three fundamental ways.

#### **Regulatory Failure**

We believe that in the Office of Drinking Water and Municipal Assistance (ODWMA) at MDEQ, a culture exists in which "technical compliance" is considered sufficient to ensure safe drinking water in Michigan.

This minimalist approach to regulatory and oversight responsibility is unacceptable and simply insufficient to the task of public protection. It led to MDEQ's failure to recognize a number of indications that switching the water source in Flint would—and did—compromise both water safety and water quality. The MDEQ made a number of decisions that were, and continue to be, justified on the basis that federal rules “allowed” those decisions to be made. ODWMA must adopt a posture that is driven not by this minimalist technical compliance approach, but rather by one that is founded on *what needs to be done to assure drinking water safety*.

A culture change must occur within ODWMA. It must be driven by a mission that is aspirational regarding the role of the MDEQ in ensuring the safety and the quality of Michigan's drinking water. We believe, and have expressed to MDEQ Director Dan Wyant, that as a Great Lakes State, Michigan should aspire to have the safest drinking water in the nation, rather than merely aiming for technical compliance with regulatory requirements.

### **Failure in Substance and Tone of MDEQ Response to the Public**

Throughout 2015, as the public raised concerns and as independent studies and testing were conducted and brought to the attention of MDEQ, the agency's response was often one of aggressive dismissal, belittlement, and attempts to discredit these efforts and the individuals involved. We find both the tone and substance of many MDEQ public statements to be completely unacceptable. In a real way, the MDEQ represents the public, including the very individuals it treated dismissively and disrespectfully in public statements. We recognize that the agency might disagree with the opinions of others on a variety of issues, including testing protocol, interpretation of testing results, the requirements of federal law and rules, and other matters. What is disturbing about MDEQ's responses, however, is their persistent tone of scorn and derision. In fact, the MDEQ seems to have been more determined to discredit the work of others—who ultimately proved to be right—than to pursue its own oversight responsibility.

### **Failure in MDEQ Interpretation of the Lead and Copper Rule**

The federal Lead and Copper Rule (LCR) is central to what happened in Flint, because that rule, at least theoretically, is designed to prevent lead and copper contamination of drinking water. The federal LCR calls for “optimized corrosion control treatment,” which the MDEQ did not require in the switch to the Flint River. Prior to the switch, MDEQ staff instructed City of Flint water treatment staff that corrosion control treatment (CCT) was not necessary until two six-month monitoring periods had been conducted. The need for CCT would be evaluated after the results from those two monitoring periods were reviewed. The decision not to require CCT, made at the direction of the MDEQ, led directly to the contamination of the Flint water system.

The MDEQ seems to have taken different positions on whether it faithfully followed the LCR in the Flint situation. It first maintained that it followed the LCR, then stated that it did not follow the rule properly, and most recently claimed that a federal memorandum issued by the US EPA in early November 2015 suggests that the original MDEQ interpretation was possibly correct.

We are not convinced. Even the MDEQ's latest interpretation of the US EPA's November memorandum is overly legalistic and misunderstands the intent of the LCR, which is to minimize risks of lead and copper exposure for human health.

We believe ODWMA's single-minded legalistic focus is the heart of the problem, and it is part of the “technical compliance” culture described above. ODWMA should not be basing its actions solely on a

legally possible interpretation of the LCR. It should be focusing on how to protect Michigan's citizens from lead in drinking water.

We met with MDEQ Director Wyant on December 16, 2015, to discuss these issues, as well as many others. We note his substantial agreement with many of our conclusions, particularly as it relates to the regulatory failure and the abysmal public response of his agency. It is our understanding that he has drawn similar conclusions in his own evaluation of the MDEQ's role in the Flint water crisis. At the same time, it was disappointing to hear his weak defense of the CCT decision based on the EPA's November 2015 memorandum.

We are not finished with our work. Other individuals and entities made poor decisions, contributing to and prolonging the contamination of the drinking water supply in Flint. As an example, we are particularly concerned by recent revelations of MDHHS's apparent early knowledge of, yet silence about, elevated blood lead levels detected among Flint's children. We also feel it important to further review local government decision processes under emergency management. Our final report will highlight and discuss those concerns, among many others, to provide some context to a comprehensive series of recommendations. **As stated earlier in this letter, however, we believe that establishing responsibility is a critical and urgent need, and one that should not wait for our final report in 2016. Individuals and agencies responsible must be held accountable in a timely fashion.**

It is our hope that the heightened awareness of the dangers of lead poisoning can be an opportunity to make Michigan safer, particularly for its children. Drinking water must be recognized as a potential source of health risk exposure when water lines and fixtures containing lead are disturbed or compromised. Proper testing, not only in high-risk areas but also in facilities serving children (e.g., schools), must be considered. Facilitating long-term financing of a model public health program, and also replacement of lead-containing water service lines and fixtures, would enable Michigan to realize a positive lasting legacy from the tragedy of the Flint water crisis. Our final report will address some of these issues.

The City of Flint's water customers—fellow Michigan citizens—were needlessly and tragically exposed to toxic levels of lead through their drinking water supply. They deserve a commitment to properly assess responsibility and ensure accountability. They also deserve a commitment to needed mitigation in both the short and long term. The Flint water crisis never should have happened. Having failed to prevent it, state government should coordinate a sustained, public-health-focused response to remedy, to the fullest extent possible, the impacts on the Flint community.

Respectfully yours,

Flint Water Advisory Task Force:

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