

Flint, Michigan: Hidden Recovery Opportunity



In April 2014, the city of Flint, Michigan switched water sources from treated Lake Huron water to the Flint River to save money. Investigations revealed that the state Department of Environmental Quality was not treating the Flint River water with chemicals necessary to prevent lead and bacteria from contaminating the public's water supply. Flint River contamination resulted in a spike in lead poisoning and other serious diseases.

Contamination and Adverse Health Effects

After the switch to Flint River water, high levels of fecal coliform bacteria were detected in the public water. Residents were informed that the pipes were flushed and more chlorine was added to the water supply. In January 2015, Flint warned its residents that the water contained byproducts of disinfectants that could cause health problems including an increased risk of cancer. One month later, the first signs of high lead levels were detected. Over 99,000 residents, hospitals and medical facilities were impacted.

State of Emergency – Legionnaires' Disease

In the fall of 2015, a state of emergency was declared for Genesee County and an outbreak of Legionnaires' disease was announced. Legionnaires' is a waterborne disease contracted by inhaling mist from contaminated water sources such as plumbing systems. It is not known to be transmitted by human contact. The outbreak occurred in the Flint area between June 2014 and November 2015 resulting in 87 known cases and at least 12 deaths from Legionnaires' disease.

A recent CDC study suggested that Legionella, the bacteria that causes Legionnaires' disease, and other harmful bacteria could thrive in the Flint water system.¹ The study also found a link between a strain of Legionella and the city's water system.

Other Pneumonias Also Implicated

The actual number of Legionnaires' cases in Flint may be higher than reported. Often cases of pneumonia are not properly diagnosed as Legionnaires'. The state's Department of Health and Human Services recently released data that shows a two-year spike in pneumonia related deaths during the time of the water source change. In 2013, there were 53 pneumonia related deaths in Genesee County. The number of pneumonia related deaths jumped to 90 in 2014 and remained elevated at 87 deaths in 2015.

Who is responsible for the treatment?

It is believed that three separate engineering firms rubber stamped the actions of the state and local government in Flint. Legionella is expensive to treat, a 2010 [press release](#) by the CDC estimated that the average treatment cost of inpatient hospitalization for Legionnaires' disease was more than \$34,000 per case.ⁱⁱ Healthcare payers who take affirmative action have the opportunity to recover these expenses. [HRS](#) has the tools required to identify and recover these expenses.

ⁱ Ron Fonger. "CDC Finds First Genetic Link between Legionnaires' Outbreak, Flint Water." MLive.com. N.p., 16 Feb. 2017. <http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2017/02/cdc_finds_first_genetic_link_b.html#incart_big-photo>.

ⁱⁱ "Press Release." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 14 July 2010. <<https://www.cdc.gov/media/pressrel/2010/r100714.htm>>.