

NATION & WORLD



Taia Dotson, 23, of Flint, stands in the kitchen of her father's home in Flint where she grew up through the water crisis. The pain in her back, knees and shoulders sometimes keeps her from reporting to work on the line at General Motors' Flint Assembly plant across town. RYAN GARZA/DETROIT FREE PRESS

A decade after water crisis, Flint residents still skeptical

Kristen Jordan Shamus Detroit Free Press | USA TODAY NETWORK

To hear Mayor Sheldon Neeley talk about his city, Flint is a flourishing city of hope.

There's General Motors announcing investments of more than \$1 billion last year in two heavy-duty truck manufacturing sites, the Flint Metal Center and Flint Assembly.

And there's Ashley Capital pledging to redevelop Buick City, a shuttered manufacturing site that spans 400 acres contaminated with pollutants linked to an array of health problems. About 270 acres will become the Flint Commerce Center industrial park.

"That tells us that our community is strong and it's thriving," Neeley told the Free Press in mid-April.

The city's municipal water system, which made headlines worldwide a decade ago because of lead contamination, is now emerging from a historic crisis.

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The majority of the lead service lines in the city have been replaced, Neeley said, and its water system has been rebuilt "from the ground up" with a new testing and delivery system and upgrades to the water plant, pumping station, reservoir and water tower, which was freshly painted in 2023 with the words: "Flint strong."

Yet the people who live in the neighborhoods, who fill the pews in the churches on Sunday mornings and line up weekly along Dort Highway for a box of free food and a case of bottled water, speak of a different Flint.

Their Flint is hardened by poverty, injustice, mistrust and fear that they may never fully understand the health effects of lead unknowingly swirling in the water from their taps a decade ago.

It's a Flint where government leaders lied to them for more than a year about the water quality while their hair fell out, their joints creaked, their skin erupted in rashes and 12 people died of Legionnaires' disease.

It's a city where the people say they feel let down by missed deadlines for replacement of lead-lined pipes, by a judicial system that dismissed the criminal charges against public officials for their alleged roles in the water crisis, and by unkept promises of payouts from a \$626.25 million legal settlement they have yet to see.

They fear it's a city the world has forgotten.

Disastrous consequences of water source switch

The decision to change the source of Flint's municipal water supply by switching the municipal water source to the Flint River in April 2014 had disastrous consequences, as river water that was too corrosive flowed through lead-lined pipes, causing the toxic heavy metal to leach into it and pour from the taps of homes across the city.

It wasn't just lead contamination that was problematic. The water wasn't properly disinfected, either. A Legionnaires' disease outbreak killed a dozen people and sickened about 90 others in 2014 and 2015.

Chlorine was added to the water supply to kill off the bacteria, sparking another health hazard. Cancer-causing chemicals called trihalomethanes, a by-product of the chlorine, proliferated.

It wasn't until a year and a half after the water switch that Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, a pediatrician at Hurley Children's Hospital in Flint, had data to prove dangerously high blood lead levels in the city's children — driven by the tainted water they had consumed.

When she blew the whistle, the world listened.

Rates of many chronic illnesses higher in Flint

Years of scientific study show that lead toxin is associated with bone, joint and muscle pain in adults — along with a host of other problems, including high blood pressure, memory and concentration difficulties, mood disorders and reproductive problems.

For children, lead exposure is especially dangerous because their bones and brains are still developing.

That bears out in the data collected in Flint.

Among the 21,858 people who signed up for the Flint Registry — a database of people who lived in the city during the water crisis that tracks health effects and also offers support and resources — rates of arthritis, chronic lung diseases, depression, hypertension, kidney disease, lupus, stroke and some other conditions are higher than in the rest of the Michigan population.

In Flint kids, 12.9% of parents reported their children have anxiety, compared with 9.4% overall in a national survey. And 8.2% say their kids have depression, almost double the rate reported by the national survey.

'It kind of feels like we're left behind'

Like many Flint residents, Taia Dotson, 23, didn't get her blood lead levels tested early enough in the water crisis to get an accurate idea of how badly she had been exposed. That's because lead leaves the bloodstream within about a month of exposure. What isn't excreted through sweat and urine settles into a person's bones, causing lasting damage.

She and her younger sister, Kyndall Dotson, had specialized bone scans that can measure long-term lead exposure. Taia Dotson's test showed extremely high levels of exposure, her mother said. Taia was 13 when Flint switched water systems.

"When I got the results of her lead test, I almost passed out, literally," said Kenyetta Dotson, 53, a minister, social



Martin Rienneau, 64, of Genesee Township, fills gallon jugs with water from a bathtub at his son's home in Beecher to use for drinking, cooking, and brushing teeth. RYAN GARZA/DETROIT FREE PRESS



A piece of an old water main lays amid a pile of pipe in downtown Flint, Mich., on Thursday. PHOTOS BY RYAN GARZA/DETROIT FREE PRESS



Mayor Sheldon Neeley touts infrastructure improvements and business investments as evidence of Flint's comeback.

worker and director of community-based implementation and engagement at Michigan State University. She works directly with the Flint Registry, the Michigan State University-Hurley Children's Hospital Pediatric Public Health Initiative and other programs to help people affected by the water crisis.

"Just hearing some of the things that she's complained about and then seeing those lead levels, it was totally devastating to me as a mother. I expected that Kyndall's exposure would have been higher because she was younger at the start of the water crisis. So when I saw that Taia's was higher, it really affected me. I was totally emotional."

Even a decade later, and despite water quality tests that show that Flint's municipal water supply meets state and federal regulations, Taia Dotson said she still drinks only bottled water.

"They haven't changed all the pipes. For sure they haven't," she said. "It kind of feels like we're left behind, like we're a blind spot, basically. Everybody just overlooks the water crisis, especially since (former Gov. Rick) Snyder and those other people were charged, but the charges got dropped."

As Taia Dotson talked about her joint pain, how expensive it is to pay for bottled water and her level of distrust, the expression on her mother's face fell.

No 23-year-old should have to worry about those things, Kenyetta Dotson said.

"We trusted those who were in leadership," she said. "...We were allowing our elected officials to be in the lead and be our voice, you know, and that just didn't happen.... Although this hap-

pened 10 years ago, lead is still in us and will remain in us until the day that we die."

City: Less than a thousand service lines still need remediation

Census data shows Flint's population has been in a freefall for decades. In 2000, Flint was Michigan's fourth-largest city with 124,943 residents. By 2023, its population estimates had fallen to 79,661 — more than 36% of Flint's people had left the city in a span of 23 years.

Distrust is embedded like the lead in the bones of many Flint residents.

"We keep hearing from public officials: 'Oh, it's the safest water in the country. It's the safest water in Michigan. It's the best water,' and I think that's probably just hard for anybody to believe anymore," said William L. Harris, marketing and data technician for the R.L. Jones Community Outreach Center, which runs a weekly food and water distribution program in Flint.

Flint got \$146 million from the federal government to remove and replace lead-lined service pipes and to complete other infrastructure projects, such as 7 miles of new pipes in a secondary delivery system, a new chemical feed building, and a reservoir and pump station upgrade — "just a litany of things," Neeley said.

The state of Michigan contributed \$350 million, which was to be spent on pipe replacement along with water quality improvements, health care needs, food, education and more.

Since the city's pipe replacement program began, nearly 120 miles of pipe

have been replaced and 29,747 water service line excavations and identifications were completed, said Caitie O'Neill, city communications director. Lead or galvanized steel pipes were found and replaced at 10,522 addresses; the rest had copper pipes that didn't need replacement.

Excavation is still needed at 885 Flint addresses, O'Neill told the Free Press on Wednesday. Of them, 332 have known lead service lines that must be replaced; the composition of the service line material is unknown at 553 addresses, she said.

There is no timeline to complete the pipe replacement project, O'Neill said, because there isn't money in the budget to pay for it.

"The city of Flint is working to identify funding to complete this remaining excavation, replacement, and restoration work," she said.

Even though the city's water has met state and federal quality standards for the last several years, Neeley said all Flint residents still should use filters on their faucets.

"We're continuing to provide water filters," he said. "What we've learned is that in Flint and throughout the country, we need to filter our drinking water. ... No amount of lead in water is safe."

Amid the worry, hope persists

Despite the skepticism and the worry that continues to plague many Flint residents, Dr. Hanna-Attisha is hopeful about Flint's prospects.

"Flint now, as compared to 10 years ago, is a better place for children," she said. "Obviously, nobody wishes the water crisis happened, but there are some really amazing things we've been able to do."

The infrastructure of support that has been built around Flint families — from the Pediatric Public Health Initiative, to the Flint Registry, free mental health services through the Genesee Health System, the Flint Kids Fund, along with ongoing efforts to provide water filters, food, education programs like Early On Michigan and more — is working to blunt the effects of the water crisis.

And the newest program, RxKids, gives \$1,500 in cash to expectant mothers in the city and an additional \$500 a month through the baby's first year.

"I have wanted for a long time the ability to prescribe away poverty," Hanna-Attisha said. "When you know what happens to children when they grow up where poverty is so chronic and so concentrated and so deep, it's damning."

Because of what happened in Flint, Hanna-Attisha said the state lowered the threshold for the action level of lead in public water systems. Now, the nation is adopting tougher standards, too, along with a plan to require lead pipe replacement across the U.S. within the next 10 years.

"What happened in Flint was not just a one-off," Hanna-Attisha said. "It wasn't this crazy story about that one city in the middle of the Great Lakes that had that water issue. It's fundamentally a story for all of us. It's about how we care for our children. It's about listening to science. It's about investing in what keeps people healthy, public health. It's about infrastructure. It's about inequities and injustices."

"The story of Flint is not so much the story of this crisis that happened, but a story of what we've been able to do next. It is the resistance. It is the uncovering. It is our hard work at the recovery and the ability ... to really make a national impact."