

Water is a Human Right

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Water is not only crucial for our survival, but it is also a fundamental human right that should be upheld and protected. Access to clean and safe water is essential for maintaining good health, practicing proper hygiene, and ensuring a high quality of life. From showering and brushing our teeth to cooking our meals and supporting agricultural activities, water plays a vital role in every aspect of our daily lives. Regardless of our background or circumstances, every individual deserves equal access to this indispensable resource. Recognizing water as a human right ensures that everyone has the opportunity to lead a healthy and fulfilling life.

Even in the United States of America, not all communities have access to clean, safe drinking water. In the city of Flint, located in southeastern Michigan, has had its fair share of economic woes following the closure of multiple General Motors automobile manufacturing plants in the 1980s-90s. This was due to rising prices in oil and auto imports. Flint's population would decline massively to nearly 100,000 people. Approximately, one in six houses have been abandoned. (*Denchak, 2018; Ray, 2023*). 41.5 percent of Flint's residents survive below the poverty line. 56.6 percent of the residents living are African American. (*Flint Michigan crisis "not just about water," UN rights experts say ahead of President Obama's visit, 2016*).

In the early 2000s, the Michigan Governor (John Engler) declared a "state of financial emergency." Executive power in Flint was held by an Engler appointed manager. The financial issues kept persisting. In 2011, Flint was burdening a \$25 million deficit that fell under the state's control. The new Michigan Governor (Rick Snyder) appointed a series of unelected emergency managers to look over the city finances and to cut costs. These appointed managers reported to the department of state treasury and not the citizens of Flint, Michigan. (*Denchak, 2018; Ray, 2023*).

These managers would make a tragically life-changing decision in the early 2010s. They decided to change the city's water supply from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) to the Flint River. Their plan was to save the city approximately \$19 million over the course of eight years. (*Ray, 2023; Stoa, 2016*). In the past, the Flint River has held a special purpose as an "unofficial" waste disposal site for many local companies. Industries have participated in this range from car factories to meat packaging plants to lumber and paper mills. The river has also received city and agricultural runoff, toxins from leaching landfills, and pure sewage from waste treatment plants. (*Denchak, 2018*).

When the city of Flint was purchasing water from the DWSD, it was treated with orthophosphate. Orthophosphate is a corrosion-inhibiting chemical that is most commonly used to help control copper and lead levels in drinking water. When the managers decided to switch the water supply, the orthophosphate treatment was not continued. The discontinued orthophosphate treatment and the Flint River's acidic pH would potentially cause heavy metals from water pipes to enter schools, homes, etc. Lead and copper levels in the city's water were predicted to increase with the new change. (*Hill, 2021*).

It was not too long after the change that residents expressed concerns. Their water had changed from once clean to foul smelling. The water quality in Flint was becoming a public health crisis. Residents protested by showing government officials jugs of the murky polluted water. Despite the uproar, residents' fears were ignored, and they were told that the water was safe to use. (*Denchak, 2018*).

The city informed the public in January 2015 that they had found increased amounts of the carcinogen trihalomethanes (an environmental pollutant), but officials argued that the water was still safe to drink. Residents living in Flint were strongly advised to boil their water due to

the presence of threatening levels of bacteria found in their water supply. Following the discovery of lead in the drinking water in February 2015, the public health danger increased. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) found in April 2015 that orthophosphate had not been added to the water at all. Private investigators found elevated levels of lead pollution in numerous residences in August and September of 2015. Many homes affected had children consuming the “safe” water. (Hill, 2021).

According to the U.S Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there are no “safe” levels for lead exposure in drinking water. Small exposure like 5 parts per billion is a cause for dangerous concern. The consequences of lead exposure/poisoning can be lifelong and are usually debilitating. In low levels, lead exposure can cause serious deficits. Some examples include hearing loss, potential learning disabilities, nervous system and kidney damage, decreased intelligence, and even poor muscle coordination. Lead is not only a strong concern for children but also adults. High lead levels in adult may cause high blood pressure, fertility issues (in both men and women), harm to a fetus, increased chance of illness/miscarriage during pregnancy, muscle/joint pain, nerve disorders, and potentially memory problems. (Hill, 2021).

According to medical assessments, drinking water in Flint that contained high levels of lead poisoned over 10,000 children. When the drinking water in one Flint residence was tested in March 2015, the results showed levels of lead more than 25 times higher than the EPA's actionable threshold. (Hill, 2021).

Flint residents have come together to share their stories about how the contaminated water has impacted their lives. For example, Nakiya shared a heartbreaking experience during a workshop called "Flint to the World: Water is a Human Right." The water that was claimed to be “safe,” left her two children with extremely high levels of lead. The lead-filled water had caused

her to have two miscarriages (where she was carrying twins twice). During this workshop, she stated “Twice I felt the lives inside me end because someone else decided that Flint residents had no right to clean, safe and affordable water, so we drank what we had, which turned out to be deadly. . . So when people argue that access to clean, safe, affordable water is not a human right, I ask them, what right do you have to take away one of the most basic survival requirements from someone else? Who are you to decide who gets to live or die?” (*Anderson, 2018*).

Governor Rick Snyder announced that the state will no longer be handing out free water in Flint after the tap water was once again declared “safe” with the use of a filter (instead of prior boiling methods). Local help centers distribute bottled water for free, but the supply may not last while you are standing in line waiting. Nakiya explained that many people cannot afford to pay the huge water bill or purchase their own bottled water. She wants to see Governor Snyder and his appointed managers held accountable for the water crisis. “I have children, I can’t just give up. I will keep fighting until they get justice. I will fight until they get Gov. Snyder. If I was governor, being African American, I would have been charged. Everyone needs to be held accountable. A mayor of Detroit was locked up for 20 years for embezzlement, but there have been 13 deaths in Flint, and no one has been incarcerated. I’ve lost children behind this; these people should be incarcerated.” (*Anderson, 2018*).

When the state stopped distributing free water, Nestle decided to step in and donate water. This is ironic considering that Nestle makes billions of dollars from the water extracted from Evart, Michigan. Nestle only pays a shocking \$200 a year for this water. Many Flint residents had to pay more than that for their contaminated water. Members of the Flint community are condemning both Governor Snyder and Nestle for their lack of accountability and general irresponsibility. In solidarity with the Flint community, Lakota People’s Law Project

is pleading for people to boycott Nestle and their multitude of products. (*Lakota People's Law Project*, 2018).

In wake of backlash, Nestle promised that three full trucks per filled of water (estimated to 100,000 bottles) will be donated from April to Labor Day. The water provided would be dispensed through the city's community help centers. This donation plan is unlikely to be super helpful. Without access to clean tap water, Flint residents will use on average 22,000 bottles of water a year. The company continues to brag about their "generous donations" to the Flint community. Yet, their permit in the city of Ewart pumps out a million and a half water bottles every nine hours. (*Lakota People's Law Project*, 2018).

When the Flint city council voted to return to DWSD, the emergency manager (who played a massive role in the water crisis) opposed the motion due to budgetary reasons. To the Flint civilians, the safety of their water should not be handled with tunnel-vision. (*Stoa*, 2016). Lives are affected by the council's decisions and actions.

Governor Snyder and his manager's inactivity to the water crisis was so bad that even the United Nations (UN) had formed opinions. According to these UN experts on extreme poverty, housing, and water and sanitation, the Flint case vividly illustrates the misery and challenges resulting from disregarding the human right to clean water, failing to guarantee the provision of essential services without discrimination, and treating the poor in ways that make their situation worse. (*Flint Michigan crisis "not just about water," UN rights experts say ahead of President Obama's visit*, 2016). This crisis had forced the US to join the consensus at the UN General Assembly in acknowledging that the right to water should be entitled to everyone...after years of trying to distance itself from this human right. (*Klasing*, 2020).

Now that we are in 2023, I find myself asking if the water in Flint, Michigan is now truly “safe.” According to the City of Flint, Michigan website, the current level of lead is 9 parts per billion (ppb) for the last six months of testing (July-December 2022). This is approximately 15 ppb below the federal standard. (*City of Flint, 2023*).

Access to clean and safe water is an essential human right that should be universally recognized and upheld. The Flint, Michigan water crisis served as a stark reminder of the devastating consequences that can arise when this right is neglected. The contamination of the city's water supply resulted in widespread health issues, particularly affecting vulnerable communities. This crisis highlighted the urgent need for comprehensive infrastructure improvements, increased accountability, and proactive measures to prevent similar incidents from occurring in the future. It is crucial that we work together to ensure that every individual, regardless of their background or location, has access to clean and reliable water sources. By prioritizing investment in water infrastructure, implementing stringent regulations, and fostering community engagement, we can create a future where clean water is not a privilege, but a fundamental right for all.

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