

A Blueprint for Disaster: Flint's Crisis, State Government's Challenges and the Policy Solutions to Both

We all need water to survive, and for many of us, it is easy to take water for granted. That's not the case everywhere, however. Here's what we know about Flint: Flint's residents were poisoned by their drinking water; the devastating effects will last for generations; it was 100% preventable; and it is largely due to a failure of state and federal government. Both personally and professionally, we at the Michigan League for Public Policy are deeply concerned about how and why this happened and what we can do.

As a policy and advocacy organization, the League is focused on standing up for the needs of Flint residents—especially the kids—right now and for decades to come. But there are also many systemic and fundamental issues in state government that set the stage for this disaster, and must be addressed to prevent a similar crisis from happening again in your city or town.

THE ROLE AND GOAL OF GOVERNMENT

The disaster in Flint was a violation of the public's trust and a failure of "public service." The core role of government is to provide basic public services like roads, clean water, education and public safety—services needed to keep citizens safe, attract companies and commerce, and fuel the economy. The needs of low-income people in Michigan, especially people of color, have largely been overlooked by state government, whether they live in places like Flint and Detroit or Northern Michigan and the Upper Peninsula.



A FAILED BUSINESS MODEL

Government should serve the public good. The recent shift to running state government like a business is also to blame for the water crisis in Flint. Many state services have endured drastic cuts over the last few years, while others have been privatized and outsourced entirely. State-appointed emergency managers were put in charge of struggling cities like Flint and school districts like Detroit. Government decision-making has been dominated by bottom lines and cost-cutting, not by Michigan residents. In Flint, the water travesty was caused by two financially-motivated decisions—switching water sources and systems and not including the necessary anti-corrosive chemicals to protect the pipes. Detroit Public Schools have continued to struggle financially and are literally falling apart while under state control, hurting kids' ability to learn and succeed.

DISINVESTMENT TO DISASTER

The current crisis in Flint stems not just from a series of one-time miscalculations or negligence, but from policy decisions made in Lansing over the last few decades that affect families and communities across the state. Public policy decisions have disproportionately had negative impacts on communities of color. It didn't start with unsafe water, and it can't end by just trying to make it right in Flint. The bottom line: The state failed to maintain its aging infrastructure and underfunded basic public services because of a rush to cut taxes for selected taxpayers, including a more than 80% cut in business taxes in 2011 alone. The perfect storm of tax reductions, budget cuts and changes in Michigan's economy left communities in debt, and deprived large numbers of the state's residents of the basic public services and safeguards they need and we all expect, including clean water and safe lead-free housing. Flint is a canary in a coal mine, warning lawmakers that more problems are to follow if they don't drastically alter their approach.



IMMEDIATE ACTION, CONTINUOUS SUPPORT AND ONGOING CHANGE

Some obvious and immediate public responses to the crisis in Flint are underway, but there is more that can and must be done. Urgent and sweeping action is also needed to address Detroit's unsafe public schools. There are tangible steps the state can take to counter the impact of lead exposure on kids in Flint and around the state, but

more needs to be done to improve the overall well-being of all children. Michigan policymakers should be working to provide all low-income kids and families with adequate education, health, nutrition and economic opportunities regardless of the color of their skin or their zip code. State elected officials must also recognize that problems similar to Flint's water and Detroit's public schools are currently or will soon be happening elsewhere around the state.

Broader fiscal and policy changes are needed, including improving infrastructure statewide, reducing wide racial disparities in well-being, embracing proven two-generation policies that help lift people out of poverty and generating new revenue to meet the state's needs.

Michigan policies are still leaving too many people behind, and over and over we are reminded that we cannot cut our way to prosperity—investment is required.

The League will be publishing a series of fact sheets that focus on the policy solutions

needed to protect all people around the state, especially kids, and prevent a disaster like the Flint water crisis from ever happening again. We urge policymakers and all Michiganders to recognize the tax and policy changes needed to protect all Michigan children and families—wherever they live.