



SPECIAL 4-PAGE REPORT

TAPPED OUT

How Pennsylvania's failing water system is hurting you

Wallace McKelvey wmckelvey@pennlive.com

A cascade of failures mean that Pennsylvanians can no longer take clean water, a right so important it's enshrined in the state constitution, for granted.

Utilities across the state struggle to maintain aging water delivery and treatment systems that need at least \$16.8 billion in upgrades over the next two decades. Meanwhile, a decade of budget cuts handed down by successive governors and legislatures gutted the state Department of Environmental Protection. That, in turn, led to systemic failures to adequately inspect those systems and to ensure problems are corrected.

"There are so many problems, there isn't one fix," said one drinking water inspector, "and with water quality the plain truth is we don't know what we don't know."

Six current and former inspectors spoke to PennLive on the condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to comment publicly or feared professional reprisal if they did.

They told similar stories of reduced oversight, increased risk and the frustration that comes with their dawning realization that protecting public health was no longer a priority.

Why does this matter?

In Pennsylvania, five people died and 38 others were sickened as a result of waterborne disease outbreaks directly linked to drinking water between 2009 and 2014, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, although such incidents — like virtually all public health data — are underreported. Other health risks, such as

exposure to lead and carcinogens, may not become apparent for years or decades.

In December 2016, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency sounded the alarm that Pennsylvania was risking public health by failing to meet federal drinking water standards. The state has yet to fully address those deficiencies.

Residents rely on filters or bottled water as a matter of course in communities like Pittsburgh and Steelton, where the DEP handed down fines related to lead and treatment byproducts found in the water.

Those, of course, are places that were the subject of intense scrutiny where the public has been alerted to the danger.

Statewide, 41 fully trained inspectors, called sanitarians, are responsible for nearly 8,500 public water systems that serve some 10 million people.

With so little oversight, experts say it's inevitable that health risks are going undetected. The EPA concluded that it was impossible for inspectors to return to the same system in the mandatory three- or five-year intervals.

"I hate to say, but it'll take a disaster to fix this," said Franklin Kury, a former state legislator who was the driving force behind Pennsylvanians' constitutional right to clean water.

Access to safe drinking water is a basic human right, he said, but it's not a "sexy issue" that spurs activists and lawmakers to action — particularly when the solutions cost millions, if not billions, of

SEE WATER, A12

19%

percentage of state water systems visited by Pennsylvania inspectors last year

37%

national average

41

number of fully trained state inspectors, responsible for nearly 8,500 public water systems that serve some 10 million people.

Inside: What you should be doing to maintain clean water. PAGE A15

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