

STATE RESPONSE

Auditor general says he's open to examining oversight of water systems

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Auditor General Eugene DePasquale said that he's open to scrutinizing Pennsylvania's oversight of public drinking water systems.

He's also eager to audit municipal authorities, a power the office of auditor general doesn't currently have.

"It's an unacceptable situation," he said, "and it's important that people have access to clean drinking water."

A decade of budget cuts gutted the state Department of Environmental Protection, leading to a 2016 warning from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency that it was risking public health by failing to meet federal drinking water standards.

The department, which inspects water utilities and pursues sanctions against frequent violators, currently has 41 fully

trained inspectors who are responsible for 8,500 water systems statewide.

Current and former state drinking water inspectors told PennLive that short-staffing led to reduced oversight, increased risk and a failure to follow up on violations with enforcement action.

DePasquale's office previously scrutinized the DEP's enforcement of oil and gas regulations. He recently said he plans to follow up on that report.

He would be open to auditing the agency's enforcement of drinking water regulations, he said, but he'd "have to make sure the audit would have the intended results."

Last year, the office was invited by Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto and the Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority to audit the util-

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ity. The resulting audit found that city officials held tremendous influence over the authority and that it had failed to properly invest in its infrastructure.

That authority is subject to a state consent decree as it deals with failing infrastructure and elevated lead levels in its drinking water.

DePasquale said he never pre-judges but he's interested in pursuing audits against other municipal authorities.

"It is the No. 1 complaint I get as auditor general that I do not have the authority to handle," he said.

Senate Bill 597, which would allow the auditor general to do that without a specific invitation, was voted out of the Senate Local Government Committee last year but hasn't made it further than first consideration.