



State leads on getting lead out

Under new Illinois law, many schools and day care centers must test water; communities will inventory lead service lines

by Illinois Rep. Sonya Harper (repsonyaharper@gmail.com)

I was sitting in a House committee in Springfield around this time last year when I received the news that 26 schools in Chicago had just tested positive for high levels of lead in their drinking water. What caught my attention the most was that my daughter's school was named in the headline of the news story as topping the list of schools with lead-contaminated water.

I immediately forwarded the article to my mother at home in Chicago, and told her to not allow my daughter to continue to drink the school water or eat any food the school prepared. My daughter was also to take her own bottled water and lunch every day. Things have been like that ever since.

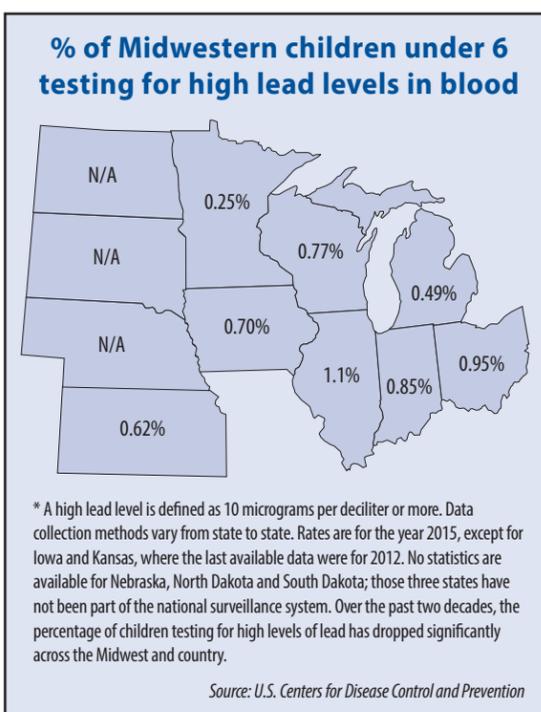
Going through this experience and others is why sponsoring SB 550 was so important to me. The legislation, which was signed into law earlier this year, requires certain schools in the state of Illinois to test for lead in their potable water sources (see article below for details).

I was no stranger to issues with lead. I grew up in the Greater Englewood neighborhood of Chicago, which has some of the highest levels of lead poisoning in the state. We are known nationwide for our gun violence and other social ills, but I am certain that the environmental factors, pollutants and physical infrastructure of our cities, villages and neighborhoods also have a profound effect on our health, quality and length of life.

Lead poses multiple dangers

Lead can be found in older homes that used lead-based paint, have contaminated soil or have drinking water pumped through leaded pipes. No amount of lead is safe, and it can cause brain damage in children and adults. Any exposure can lead to a lower IQ, ADHD, hearing problems, stunted growth, or digestive and reproductive problems.

My community is home to grass-roots nonprofit



organizations such as Imagine Englewood If, which for the past 10 years have been training residents and parents on ways to prevent lead poisoning and ways to detect it in homes, soil and water.

While I am proud of the hard work they do, there is no way they can fulfill all of the educational, identification and mitigation needs of our community based on their current capacity. States and local governments must find more ways to educate people on environmental concerns such as lead, clean air and water and then work swiftly to remediate areas where people are obviously showing signs of illnesses resulting from these environmental issues.

While I was not happy to see that my child's school had high levels of lead in some of its water sources, I was happy that Chicago Public Schools was proactive and decided to test its schools even before this legislation was introduced. After seeing what

happened to our neighbors in Flint, Mich., Chicago was not about to let the status of our children's drinking water go unknown, especially knowing the detrimental and irreparable effects of lead poisoning.

Lead in water or in soil speaks to the larger issues of environmental justice that many communities like mine across the country have been dealing with for generations. In most places across the state and country, ethnic minorities and/or those of a certain socioeconomic status tend to inhabit areas with a greater number of environmental concerns. You will notice in these areas that people, especially children, suffer from high rates of ailments such as respiratory illnesses like asthma, lead poisoning and others.

Next step: Paying for mitigation

It is up to our states to help local communities deal with these serious environmental concerns. Every day we should be asking ourselves: How can we pass better laws and policies that will ensure all of our children a fair chance to grow up healthy by allowing them to breathe clean air and eat food that was grown and prepared with clean, lead-free water?

Today my daughter's school has either fixed or permanently disconnected the fountains and sinks that were found to have lead contamination above the EPA action level of 15 parts per billion. This is a school district where 80 percent of the children are economically disadvantaged. I know everyone can't afford to bring a bag lunch and bottled water to school each day, so that means we still have a lot of work to do.

I commend my colleagues for helping me pass SB 550 in order to get the testing done at all schools in Illinois, but now we have to figure out how we pay for any mitigation that might be needed for schools that test positive. I look forward to working on that in the near future with the continued assistance of grass-roots community organizations such as Imagine Englewood If and dedicated advocacy groups such as the Illinois Environmental Council.

Not only are we to be good servants of the people, but also good stewards of this Earth that houses and takes care of the people. Paying close attention to issues dealing with the environment and public health helps us do just that. ★

Rep. Sonya Harper is a Democrat from Chicago.

Requirements of SB 550, Illinois' recently enacted lead-testing law

- School buildings built before 2000 that serve 10 or more children in grades pre-K through 5, whether public, private, charter, or nonpublic day or residential institutions, will need to test each source of potable water for lead. Those sources include taps, faucets, drinking fountain, and classroom wash basins as well as food-preparation water sources, but janitorial sinks and basins are excluded.
- The water to be tested is to be the first draw of water that has been standing in pipes for at least 8 hours but not more than 18 hours. If a sample exceeds 5 parts per billion, the school is to promptly notify parents and legal guardians of the location in the school where that sample was taken. Note that this level is below the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's lead action level of 15 ppb.
- Schools built before 1987 are to conduct testing by Dec. 31, 2017. Schools built from 1987 to 1999 are to be tested by Dec. 31, 2018. The state will determine by June 30, 2019, if schools built from 2000 onward will need to conduct lead testing as well.
- Licensed day care centers, day care homes and group day care homes built before 2000 that serve children under the age of 6 will need to test drinking water for lead based on rules that will be in place by Jan. 1, 2018. Those rules are to include testing requirements, training requirements and notification of results.
- Community water systems are to complete a comprehensive inventory of lead service lines in their system by April 15, 2018, and update that information annually. Such systems are also to notify potentially affected residences of construction or repair work on water mains, lead service lines or water meters that could potentially increase lead levels in drinking water. Notification is not required if the inventory shows that the water system being worked on is lead-free.

Submissions welcome

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