

Flint Water Crisis Case Study:

The following case study illustrates the importance of finding and using information when making decisions in Social Work and related professions.

Social workers gather information directly from their clients and communities to understand people's lived experiences; social workers gather government and nonprofit data to build community profiles; they explore the highest quality academic and scholarly research to understand the causes behind social issues.

Social workers use all of these types of information sources - and more - to make evidence-based decisions to help their clients, their communities, and their own families. This case study shows the tragic consequences that can occur when decision-makers don't consult or ignore information sources that disagree with their preconceptions.

In the latter part of the 20th century, the population of Flint, Michigan declined by nearly half. Economic depression followed. Residents urged leaders to relieve the burden of pricey water, since monthly rates in Flint were among the most expensive in the country, even while 42% of residents lived below the poverty level.

In Spring 2014, Flint, under direction from state officials, began bringing in its water from the polluted Flint River. The old Flint water treatment plant needed a series of difficult and expensive upgrades, only some of which took place as engineers had recommended in their reports. The water treatment program also did not include corrosion control because the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) said - incorrectly - that it wasn't necessary.

After the switch, neighbors grew alarmed at the water that flowed from their kitchen taps and showerheads. They brought plastic bottles of brown, particulate-laden water to public meetings. They reported skin rashes and hair loss following showers. But city and state officials continued to insist that the water leaving the treatment plant met the standards of the Safe Drinking Water Act. They were wrong.

One resident, Lee-Anne Walters, contacted the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and was able to get an EPA manager to test the water in her home. They found that the levels of lead in the water in Walter's home were more than seven times the EPA's acceptable limit. Walters then connected with a scientist at Virginia Tech University who tested 300 other water samples in Flint in September 2015 and found that 84% contained unacceptable levels of lead.

Around the same time, Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, a pediatrician at Hurley Medical Center in Flint, compared the blood tests of over 700 Flint children in 2013 (before the water switch) with the blood tests of over 700 Flint children in 2015 (after the water switch). The results were staggering – more than twice as many children were suffering from lead poisoning.

Ms. Walters and Dr. Hanna-Attisha were initially ridiculed and vilified by officials at MDEQ. It was only after *The Detroit Free Press* and other agencies corroborated their findings and made them public that the MDEQ backed down and apologized. Meanwhile, residents had endured two years of stonewalling and dismissal from their government.

In the years since public acknowledgement of the crisis, numerous research studies have been conducted to measure the true impact. One research study found an increase of 58% of fetal deaths in affected areas. Another found a decrease in birth weight among babies

conceived and born during the crisis. Several government officials, including former governor Rick Snyder, were charged with a range of felonies and misdemeanors for their role in the crisis. Victims of the crisis have, so far, been awarded a settlement of over \$600 million. Despite this, the true cost to the people of Flint remains to be seen, as those children most affected by lead poisoning face life-long consequences.

*Adapted from:

Clark, Anna. "'Nothing to worry about, the water is fine': How Flint poisoned its people." *The Guardian*, July 3, 2018.

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jul/03/nothing-to-worry-about-the-water-is-fine-how-flint-michigan-poisoned-its-people>

"Flint Water Crisis Fast Facts." *CNN*, April 8, 2018.

<https://www.cnn.com/2016/03/04/us/flint-water-crisis-fast-facts/index.html>