

Fears of another Michigan water crisis

DETROIT

Elevated lead and copper prompts Detroit schools to shut drinking fountains

BY SARAH MASLIN NIR

For a year now, Marcel Clark, a Detroit police officer and father of three, has been filling a 50-gallon drum each week with purified water for his family to drink. Ever since he heard about the water contamination crisis in Flint, Mich., an hour's drive away, he hasn't trusted the aging copper and steel pipes in his house. He has been talking to contractors about replacing them and hopes to get the work done in the next few months.

"As a responsible parent, I said to myself, 'Let me go ahead and secure my family,'" said Mr. Clark, 48.

But his children may have been exposed to tainted water anyway — at school.

The water fountains in all 106 schools run by the Detroit Public Schools Community District have been dry since classes began in August. The superintendent ordered them shut off as a preemptive measure, after testing revealed elevated levels of copper and lead in drinking water at some schools. After completing checks at 86 of the schools last month, officials announced that 57 of them had lead or copper levels above the federal thresholds that require action to be taken.

The situation has set parents on edge in Detroit, 60 miles southeast of Flint, where contaminated water sickened residents while officials dismissed their concerns for months, insisting that the water was safe. Flint's crisis prompted Detroit officials to start testing school water supplies in 2016.

"We are talking about Detroit now because we proactively tested all water sources, and defined the problem with a solution," said Nikolai P. Vitti, the superintendent of Detroit schools. "I think large urban areas around the country have infrastructure as outdated as ours is, and they don't know if there is lead or copper in the water, because they are not testing it."

Based on Detroit's experience, Dr. Vitti has called for a nationwide require-



Marcel Clark, a Detroit police officer, doesn't trust his home's aging copper and steel water pipes, so he fills a 50-gallon drum each week for his family to drink from.

ment for water testing in schools; there is no such rule now.

The situation in Flint, which began after the city changed its water source in 2014, raised concerns over water safety around the United States. In rural communities, residents have complained of tainted wells tied to industrial farms and lax regulations. In Newark, N.J., officials insisted for months that drinking water was safe before reversing course last month when a new study showed lead contamination.

After the Flint crisis erupted, Michigan stepped up blood testing of children for elevated lead levels. A report by the

Michigan Department of Health and Human Services found in 2016 that a higher percentage of children younger than 6 had elevated levels in Detroit than in any other Michigan county — nearly 9 percent, compared with a statewide average of less than 4 percent. The study noted that a larger share of Detroit children were tested than in other places.

"We are a baby Flint — or a Flint coming," said Aliya Moore, an artist in Detroit. One of her daughters, Chishawna Jefferson, is an 11th grader at Cass Technical High School, where water tests found high levels of copper and lead.

Some parents, like Mr. Clark, the police officer, praised Dr. Vitti for stepping in to stem the problem even before the full extent of contamination was known.

Others voiced outrage that the problem had gotten as far as it had, including Roslyn Markhal, whose daughter attends Chrysler Elementary, another school found to have elevated copper or lead levels in its water.

Experts say the problem in Flint developed after officials switched to a new source of water but failed to add chemicals needed to prevent corrosion.

In Detroit, officials and water quality experts say, the issue may simply be ag-

ing pipes. Much of the thousands of miles of plumbing in the city's schools is decades old, and has been rarely updated. That has left many people wondering how long the problem existed before anyone started testing the water.

"It's horrible," said Ms. Markhal, who works in health care. "Twenty years of pipes — that was around the time I was going to school."

Joints and other plumbing components often contain metals that can leach into the water over time. And the way water runs through pipes in schools — only intermittently, rather than in a constant or frequent flow — adds to the

problem, according to Elin Betanzo, a water quality expert. Anti-corrosive additives in the water must run through pipes consistently to be effective in preventing leaching.

In the schools in Baltimore, officials have been using bottled water for drinking since 2007, after tests revealed elevated lead levels there. "This is not just a Detroit problem, this is an everywhere problem," Ms. Betanzo said. "And we have been ignoring it for years."

Ripping out all the old plumbing in the Detroit schools is financially impossible, said Dr. Vitti, the superintendent. The district has been saddled for years with financial troubles and deteriorating infrastructure. From 2009 to 2016, the school system was run by emergency managers appointed by the state; then it was divided in half so that the Detroit Public Schools Community District could shed debt.

Over the past 18 months, the Detroit Health Department has ramped up efforts to test children who may have been exposed, including sending workers to knock on the doors of every resident in neighborhoods where children have been found with elevated copper or lead levels, according to Tamekia Ashford, a spokeswoman for the department.

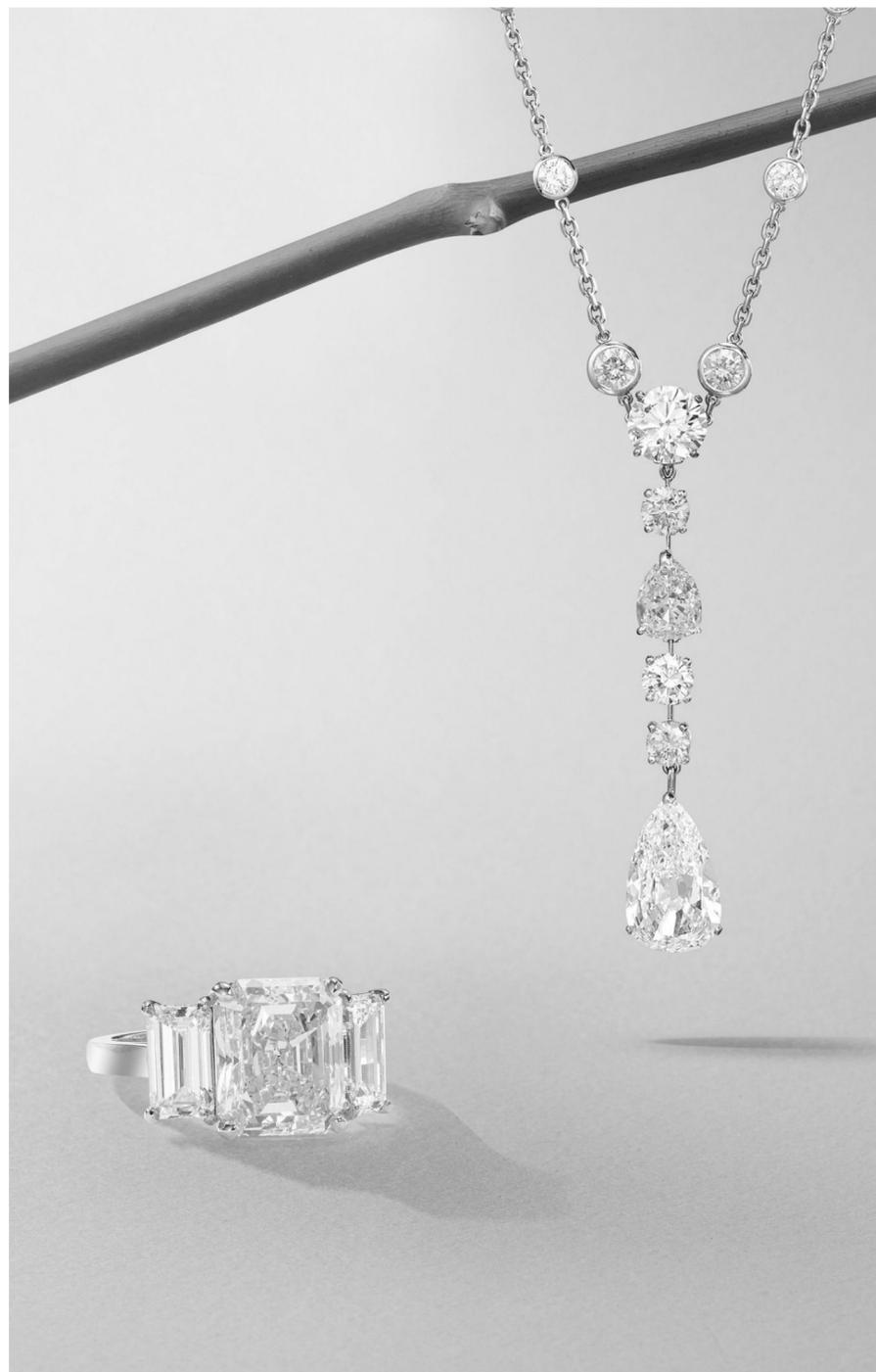
Detroit officials now say a solution is at hand: a \$3 million project to put filtration systems in every school, paid for mostly by philanthropic donations. Installation of the first of 800 new "hydration stations" — drinking taps equipped with filters to remove contaminants — began last month.

The plan is little comfort to some caregivers, who fear that their children have already been exposed.

In the meantime, temporary water coolers have replaced water fountains in most schools, and students said they have adapted to the new situation.

"We used to didn't need permission to get water; we just got water," said Cherrill Markhal, 6, a student at Mann Elementary School, which tested positive for contaminants. She described how her first-grade class is led by a teacher several times a day to a cooler to fill up their water bottles.

"It should have never gotten to this level of the game," said Barbara Cannon, 67, who packs bottled water for her grandson to take with him to Mann Elementary. "Up in Flint, Mich., the water is really poison. I hope it doesn't get to that point in Detroit."



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