

Will Water Wither

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Normally after consuming a meal, exercising or before starting your day, one's first thought is often to "get some water." Typically, whether receiving this water by tap or bottle, the first thought is not "I wonder just how safe this water is for me." The World Health

Organization reports that 91% of the world's population utilizes water from an improved source. However, this leaves over 600 million people with no access to a better source of water. For many communities, the daily question, "I wonder how safe this water is for me?" is a reality.

Several years ago, Flint Michigan was synonymous for anything related to lead and water. There was a state, local and worldwide buzz pertaining to how lead was a major concern for citizens. Today, the buzz has dimmed, and while progress was made with the majority of the lead service lines have been replaced. However, the trust in Flint water has not been fully restored. In fact, what has been learned from this outcry is that many other communities are facing similar challenges. Many are communities of color and low socio-economic status who have not been given a seat at the table. This table is where decisions impacting their community are made, ranging from environmental health issues to financial distribution. Having the honor to intern at Freshwater Future provided me with a deeper look into such communities.

Freshwater Future has been a driving force impacting policies to protect the water for communities surrounding the Great Lakes Region. This organization is intentional about achieving their goal of promoting safe, clean, accessible and sustainable water. It has been echoed that water should be a basic right for every individual but if it is not potable, it will serve no purpose.

An example of this is Freshwater Future's engagement within six communities in Toledo, Ohio. Freshwater Future

is implementing a grant to help the City effectively and efficiently identify where the greatest density of lead service lines are located with the use of artificial intelligence. This saves funds and will speed up the replacement of pipes, ultimately protecting public health. A key part of this project is to inform and engage residents about lead in drinking water. The fact is, no amount of lead is safe. Building connections with community gate keepers and residents has been effective in their receptiveness and willingness to support changes that will take place. Partnered and meaningful communication with the City of Toledo and Blue Conduit, a water infrastructure analytics consultant, allows the opportunity for a diverse perspective which ensures productivity. Useful methods have included a communications toolkit, trainings and webinars specifically tailored to the needs of residents, and involving community leaders to deliver information.

A major component of this grant consists of supplying residents with the technology needed to attend such webinars and training. In many cases when grants are awarded for a specific goal or projects implemented in underserved communities, the residents and their concerns are overlooked. With no connection or respect, projects are not sustainable resulting in a recurrence of community challenges. Integrated community work is not mandatory but essential for success. FWF's work in Toledo is one example of this.

To reduce resident's exposure to lead in drinking water, we must be intentional not only about the science, but also how the information is delivered. A way forward is to be genuine in an approach to promote education through inclusion. This includes, but is not limited to, hiring people of color in strategic roles, promoting diversity, and funding inclusion efforts. The fight to end environmental injustice is far from over. It takes more than one organization to make a change. People at the table should be intentional about including those that will consume what is being served.

Sanchez is a current PhD/MPH student at Tuskegee University. His research focuses on serving underserved communities regarding environmental public health challenges in their fight to access quality water.