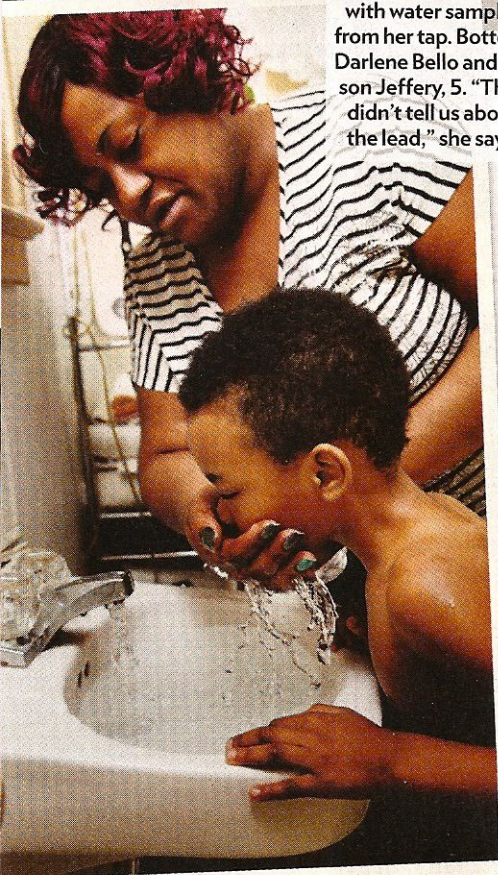




**Dire Consequences**

Walters in January with water samples from her tap. Bottom: Darlene Bello and her son Jeffery, 5. "They didn't tell us about the lead," she says.



**FLINT, MICHIGAN**

**POISONED BY TAP WATER**

Two Michigan moms lead the fight to uncover how their city exposed their children—and the entire community—to a contaminated water supply

**T**he first time LeeAnne Walters noticed something was terribly wrong with her water was in December 2014, when she turned on the kitchen faucet to begin rinsing the dinner dishes. The water was dark brown and reeked, she says: "It smelled like rotten eggs. We were confused. What's coming through our tap?"

The worst was yet to come. In late February 2015, after demanding answers from local officials for weeks, Walters learned that the lead levels flowing out of her tap were nearly 10

times the acceptable limit. In other words, her family's water was poison. "My knees buckled, and I had to grab the countertop," says Walters, 38, a stay-at-home mom to four kids. "I was just bawling."

By that time Walters had teamed up with Melissa Mays, another Flint, Mich., mom who was seriously concerned about the water. "My job is to protect my family," says Mays. "You don't mess with my kids." Together they helped expose one of the worst cases of water contamination in the history of the state, if not the nation.

TOP: WILLIAM ARCHIE/DETROIT FREE PRESS/ZUMA



The regional EPA administrator has resigned, two state environmental officials have been suspended, and the state attorney general has hired a special counsel to investigate. “I’m sorry, and I will fix it,” Gov. Rick Snyder said in his Jan. 20 State of the State address. “Government failed you. . . . You deserve to know the truth, and I have a responsibility to tell the truth.”

Flint’s water problems began in April 2014, shortly after the city switched its water supply from Detroit to the Flint River as a cost-cutting measure. Flint officials opted to bypass the required treatments that would have kept corrosive elements already in the Flint River water from deteriorating existing pipelines, which in turn allowed lead and copper to contaminate the city’s water. Almost immediately residents began complaining about the smell. In the months that followed, people also started suffering from painful rashes, fatigue, muscle soreness and hair loss. All of which city officials virtually ignored, insisting that the water was fine. In January 2015, alarmed by the health problems her family were experiencing—including weight loss, unexplained fevers and migraines—Walters showed up at a city council meeting with samples of her contaminated water. “They were calling me a liar,” she says. “My daughter took a step back and looked at the woman next to her and said, ‘My mom’s going to jail tonight. She’s going to punch them.’”

As fate would have it, that woman was Mays, 37, who has three sons. Within weeks Walters and Mays had joined forces around “Water You Fighting For” ([wateryoufightingfor.com](http://wateryoufightingfor.com)), with Mays rallying the community, organizing protests and creating flyers to warn residents. For her part Walters continued to focus on the water itself—and on getting answers. Her efforts ultimately led her to the

### The Ongoing Crisis

1. Walters at home with son Gavin, 4, who has lead poisoning. “This is why I wouldn’t back down.” 2. The National Guard distributes water. 3. “We don’t even trust the bottled water,” says Mays, testing samples in her kitchen.



EPA’s Miguel Del Toral and Virginia Tech’s Marc Edwards, who collected and confirmed the toxic test results that helped blow the scandal wide open. “LeeAnne really is the linchpin in all of this,” says the ACLU’s Curt Guyette. “She’s the one that found the right allies.”

Another key figure was Dr. Mona Hanna-Attish, a local pediatrician who analyzed the results of blood-lead-level tests in children before 2013 and after 2015. Last September she publicly revealed that the percentage of kids with lead poisoning had doubled—even tripled in some neighborhoods. That tragic news finally prompted Governor Snyder to acknowledge the problem.

**‘I’ve looked into the face of evil, and it’s ugly’**

—FLINT RESIDENT LEEANNE WALTERS

Meanwhile, the scandal continues to grow. Though the city switched back to Detroit’s water supply in October, it still isn’t safe to drink or even use the tap water. Thousands of donated bottles of water flow into the city daily, while parents are lining up at schools to get their children tested for lead poisoning. Some, like Darlene Bello, just learned about the problem. “I’m so nervous right now—I want to take him to emergency,” says Bello, 41, of her son Jeffery, 5, who is in the most vulnerable age group. “Parents are put on this earth to protect their children. I could not protect him.”

Walters understands. She’s now pushing for changes in both state and federal law, hoping to prevent a similar catastrophe in the future. “It’s too late for me,” she says, “but I don’t want this to happen to anyone else.”

By Nicole Weisensee Egan with Ellen Piligian and Caitlin Keating

## FLINT'S WATER CRISIS A TIMELINE

**APRIL 2014**  
In a cost-cutting move, Flint’s water supply is switched from the Detroit water-supply system to the Flint River.

**JULY 2015**  
An internal memo from the EPA is leaked, showing high levels of lead in Flint’s tap water.

**SEPTEMBER 2015**  
Tests of children living in Flint reveal that levels of lead in their bloodstreams have doubled or even tripled.

**OCTOBER 2015**  
After authorities finally admit there’s a problem with the water, Flint switches back to the Detroit water system.

**JANUARY 2016**  
President Obama declares a federal emergency in Flint. The water problem still isn’t fixed.