

Environmental Racism and the Flint Water Crisis

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Background

The residents of Flint, Michigan, 54.8% African- Americans and 61% of them living under the national poverty line, 1.5% native Spanish speakers (~1,500 residents) have gone without safe, clean drinking water for 3 years, 10 months, 26 days and counting.

This study seeks to explore race and class bias in state officials' management of the water crisis.

Methods

The content analysis of archival research uses 6 government-issued Boil Water and Lead advisories, ~50 emails from the Lab Director of Michigan's Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) that were made publicly available, and comparison maps of the free filter and water handout sites in relation to the neighborhoods directly affected. Focusing on theories of racism, poverty, and manifest (obvious) and latent (hidden) functions of the Boil Water and Lead advisories, I investigate the biased decisions made by city officials and their intentional and unintentional results.

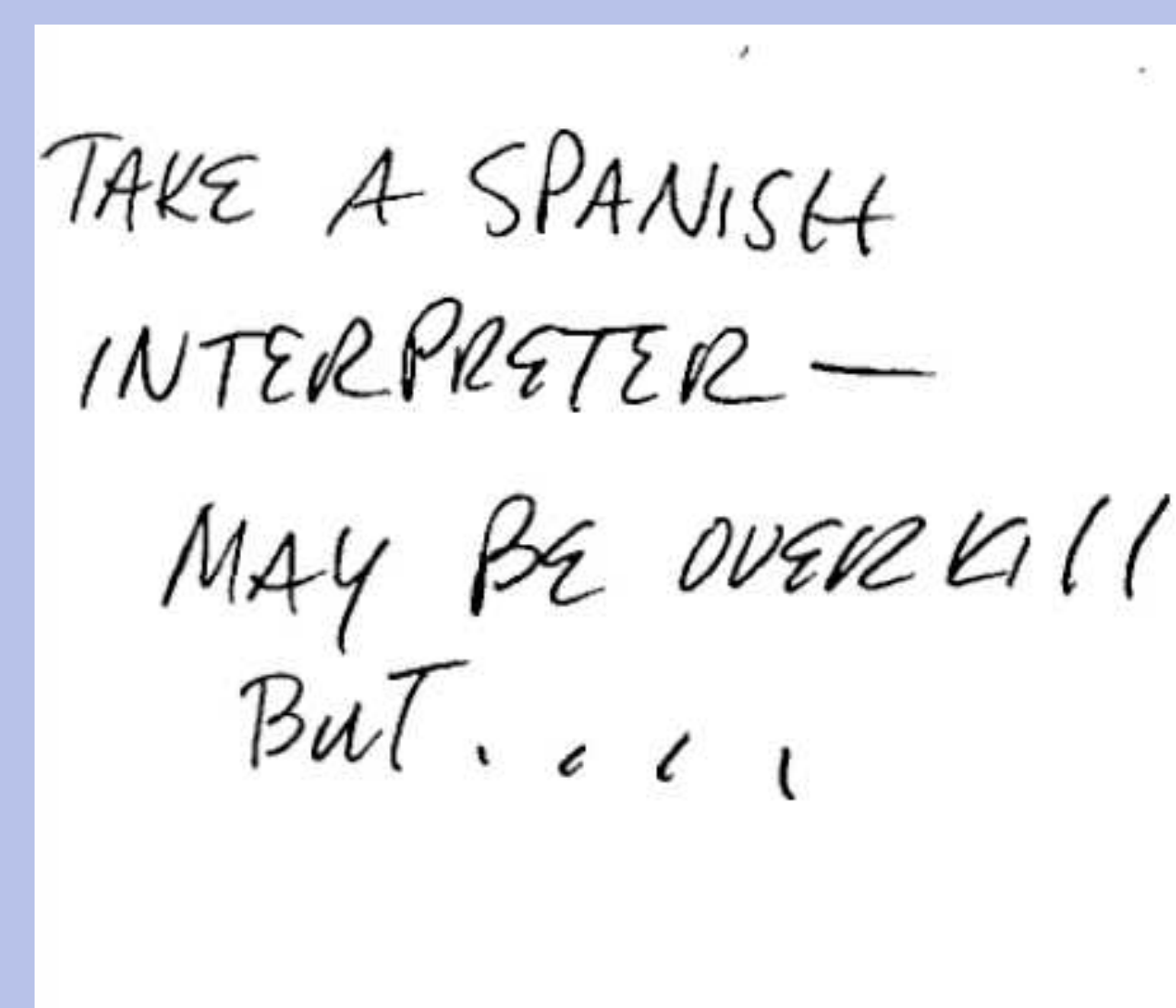
White Racism



The advisories were written to be understood by educated, wealthy, white people and used coded language that showed white privilege. They were written with expectations that the residents could understand the advisories and perform all the suggested tasks. None of the advisories were translated to Spanish, even with hundreds of native Spanish speakers.

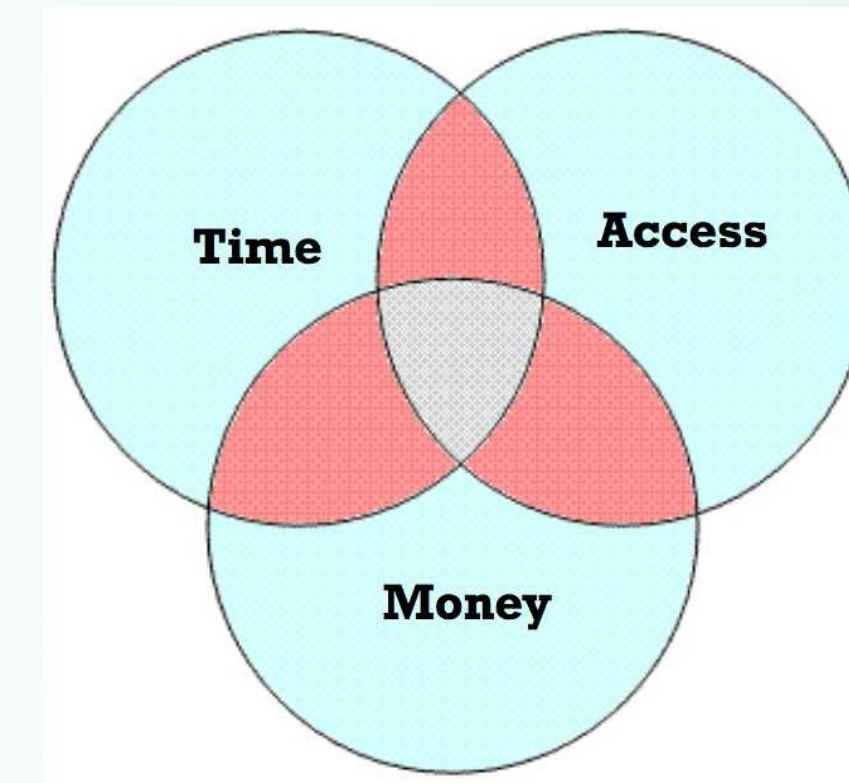


City officials were aware of the Spanish speaking residents, but felt the need of an interpreter to be “overkill”.



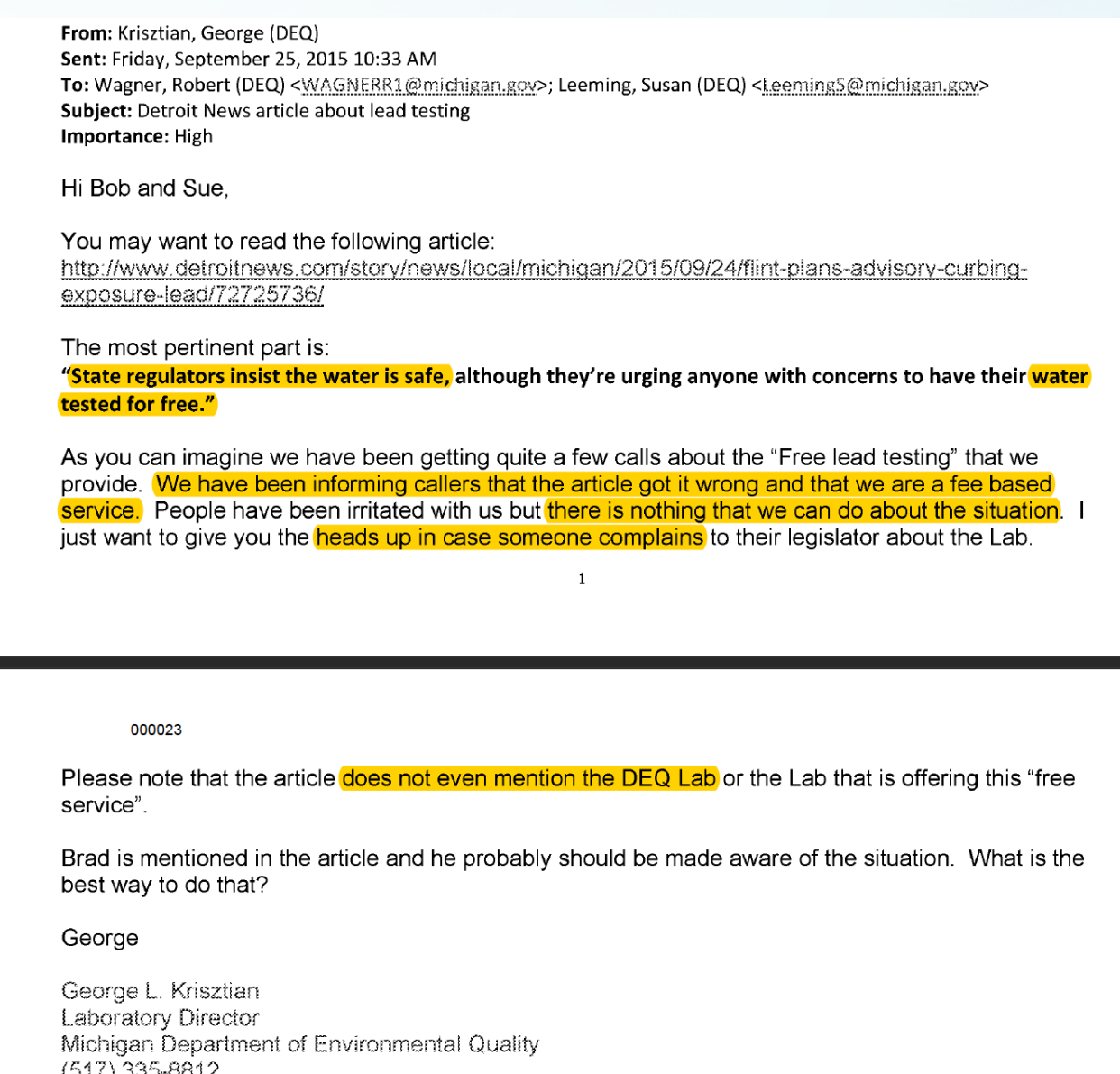
Findings

Inaccessibility of Resources



With such a high number of residents living under the national poverty line, classism is demonstrated from city officials by their discriminatory actions of not providing sufficient access of resources to individuals of a low social class. Were the residents not worthy of such aid?

- Sites were open from 9AM-4PM
- A family of 3 is expected to use 7 cases each day
- Each case weighs 25 pounds, costs \$3-\$5



Concerned, low-income residents could get their water tested for lead...but through **fee based** service from the DEQ.

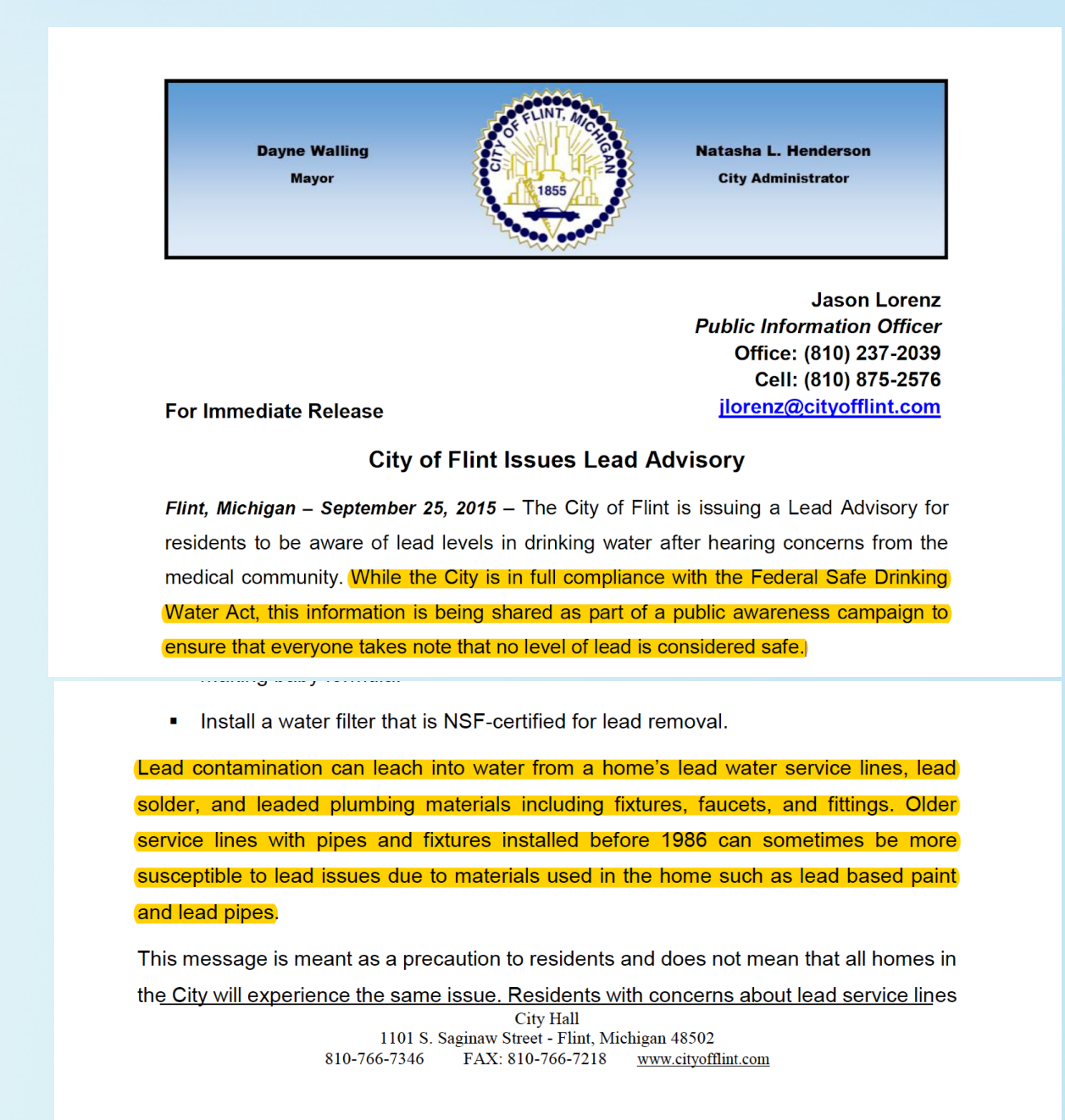
Detachment and Defensive Behavior

The DEQ focused on controlling the release of information to avoid responsibility instead of keeping the residents safe.

George Krisztian, Lab Director of DEQ, said:

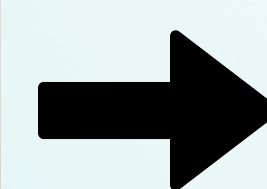
- "...action plan is for your information ONLY. Please do not distribute these materials to anyone" Oct. 2, 2015
- "I do not need to see the data. The result for me is fine." Jan. 23, 2015
- "So I don't say something at the press conference that I can't deliver on" Oct. 2, 2015

Latent Functions of Advisories



- Accused the residents of allowing lead to contaminate their own homes
- Excused city officials' role in causing harm to residents by switching to a corrosive water source

"Things just don't work right in Flint"
-Michigan Journalist



This quote is from an interview with a Flint journalist, implying territorial stigma of dysfunctionality among Flint and its residents.