

Science AMA Series: I'm a stay-at-home mom and citizen scientist who helped expose the Flint water crisis. People are calling me the next Erin Brockovich. AMA!

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Abstract

Hi everyone! In April 2014, a decision was made to switch Flint's water source from Lake Huron to the Flint River. Since then, the city has faced unending water woes. After numerous boil advisories and a violation of TTHM (total trihalomethane) levels, our water became discolored, and I decided to educate myself on everything water and water distribution. Eventually we had the water tested properly and it came back at 2.5 times the level of hazardous waste. It was after that and reading the monthly operational reports that I learned that officials were breaking a federal law. They denied it and threatened me with Child Protective Services if I didn't bow to their wants. They wanted me to sign a document stating I would never pursue them for poisoning my son. They even offered me money. Then, when trying to figure out what I should expect from my son (who also has a compromised immune system) being lead poisoned, I was told by a state nurse that it was nothing. "Just a few IQ points—it's not the end of the world." With the local, state, and federal government against us, my family forged ahead and with the help of Marc Edwards and his Virginia Tech team led a sampling of almost 300 homes. This sampling proved there was a city-wide problem. Because of everything that has happened, I have now become a water activist and citizen scientist. The breaking of a federal law in Flint makes what happened an anomaly, but there is still a nation-wide problem. There are lead pipes throughout the country and almost every state allows testing with loopholes. We need to keep a conversation about lead at the forefront to help protect this nation's children. I'm here to answer any questions you have about my experience and what I learned. Also, I make an appearance in PBS NOVA's new film about the Flint crisis, called "Poisoned Water," which you can watch online for free here. They also made a video profile of me for their website. Finally, here are both parts to an interview I did with Constantine Cannon. I'll be back at 1pm EST to answer your questions. AMA!

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LEEANNE_WALTERS [R/SCIENCE](#)

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LeeAnne_Walters , r/Science ,
Science AMA Series: I'm a
stay-at-home mom and citizen
scientist who helped expose
the Flint water crisis. People

Hello, and thank you for not giving up!

Aside from the water aspect, have any of the officials who tried to bribe, blackmail or shut you down been subject to charges stemming from their intimidation?

[annoyedatwork](#)

Yes some of them, not all of them yet do have charging pending

What other cities may have troublesome water supplies that we, the public, are not aware of?

[dopkick](#)

There are many across the U.S. that have troublesome water. Most states allowed testing with

are calling me the next Erin Brockovich. AMA!, *The Winnower* 4:e149632.21446 , 2017 , DOI: [10.15200/winn.149632.21446](https://doi.org/10.15200/winn.149632.21446)

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loopholes to hide and minimize lead in water. If people want to send me guidance sheet from their local water departments I can tell you if your state is. My email is lwalters253@yahoo.com

What is the reality of the current situation, both for your family and the city of Flint? Has the crisis been resolved? Have you and your family moved out of the city? Do you still receive threats from officials? Has your child's health recovered?

[RoboStrong](#)

Reality is that because of the damage to the pipes they cannot maintain proper chlorine levels in some parts of the city which leaves us a risk for bacteria. We are still fighting to health coverage for adults who were lead poisoned. My husband is active military and was restationed, so me and the kids still live 2 weeks a month in the city, fighting for our community. I do not still receive threats from officials. My childrens health has not recovered. The scary thing about lead poisoning is that all the damage from the lead does not show immediately. My twins especially have new health problems that have developed in in recent months.

What legal mechanism are they exploiting to circumvent the testing?

[GoliathFilipino](#)

They are testing with loopholes, which is still legal because EPA has not fixed the Lead and Copper Rule yet. They knew these loophole were dangerous when the kids in D.C. were poisoned and did NOTHING to change what would happen next.

What do you mean when you call yourself a "citizen scientist"? Do you have any relevant qualifications or experience? Whatever the answer may be, I think you're doing important work - I'm just curious for the sake of context.

Thanks for your time!

[entropydecreaser](#)

Well I was given the title citizen scientist by others and after all the extensive research I have done, I agree with it and am proud to be considered one. To me, a citizen scientist is a person who does the research and uses good, proven science to figure out a problem. During my time of teaching myself about water distribution systems, water quality, chemicals used to treat water, the laws used to mandate water treatment, health effects, etc I applied two key things: The scientific method and what I was taught in journalism. I do not have a degree in science, I do have certification as Medical Assistant. Great question!

Were you shocked (as I am) that people acted harshly to you calling attention to the water crisis?

This isn't a question but I just wanted to offer support to you and your family. I can't imagine how doing the right thing has changed your life so drastically. Who would have thought that calling attention to something so important as clean water in America would cause so much suffering for you all. It makes me feel like if I ever needed help from our government or decided to call them out on something that A.) they will try to buy my silence or B.) they would do everything in their power to make my life miserable. I live in Northern IN so flints water problems seem too close to home. Thank you for being a fighter!

[Americanfloosie](#)

Thank you for your support. I used to say I feel like I am living in a third world country because this was happening and no one would help. How do you not only ignore brown water, hair loss and rashes but then demean the people its hurting?! It was surreal. I was later corrected by someone from a third world country on this. I was told its worse, because at least in a third world country they are taught to not trust their government.

That all sounds incredibly corrupt. Both from the nurses and the officials. Do you feel like the amount of work out into this has been satisfactory? Have those responsible been through the justice system or are they still going free?

[Focie](#)

Oh doctors offices were in on it too! At one point they refused to test my children for lead and told me they had to wait to get permission from the city. I couldn't figure out what the hell that meant and why would my son's own personal dr be talking to city. I then discovered the Dr's wife was the Emergency Managers assistant! Talk about corrupt! No, for the things we are still fighting for in the City, it is not satisfactory. Some people to date have been charged, but not nearly enough. When I contacted the head nurse in charge of the lead prevention program in Lansing with questions about my son because he also has a compromised immune system her response to me was, Its not the end of the world, its just a few IQ points.

how long would you say most families were using this poison water before anyone REALLY knew what the problem was?

[TheLazyVegan](#)

The switch happened April 2014. Our first symptom started June 2014. I can tell you even after it was declared a crisis some people in Flint didn't know in February/March 2016.

With all this information you have gained, What do you STILL want to know about governmental failure in recent Michigan history?

[MooCows4](#)

I want to know how far up this goes, who knew what when. I want to know why after reading all the emails that were obtained through FOIA, that since the state figured out there was a problem in 2014 shortly after the switch who made the ultimate decision to keep it hidden.

Were you offered money to keep quiet or not to sue them? How much money did they offer you exactly?

[JurijFedorov](#)

I was given a damage claim to fill out and to put a price tag on my child's life. When I wouldn't cooperate I was given what they called a standard agreement, which it was not to sign away my right and my children's rights in order to replace my service line, which also included a copy of my son's lead test. My service line was galvanized iron, the city's service line was lead. When I wouldn't sign that I was told they would hate to see something happen to my child because I didn't have their best

interest at heart and that I was allowing them to continue to be poisoned by not signing what they wanted.