When the problem of tainted drinking water created a public health crisis in the Michigan city of Flint, the state’s legislators had two clear missions to fulfill. First, fix the problem, with strategies — both immediate and longer-term — that help affected residents, bring back some normalcy to their lives, and then assist in the entire community’s recovery. Second, find ways to prevent the problem from ever occurring in another Michigan city.

And that idea of prevention has spread well beyond the borders of Michigan, with legislators in nearby states taking notice of the crisis and beginning to think more about the safety of the water supply in their own districts.

“The tragedy of Flint definitely was felt here,” says Illinois Rep. Sonya Harper, who represents a part of Chicago’s South Side. “It made you think whether it could happen here, and to think about ways to prevent it from happening.”

As a first step, she is hoping for passage of SB 550, a bill that would require many elementary schools in Illinois (those built before 2000) to have their water tested for lead. The mandate also would extend to certain day care facilities.

“It’s such a huge undertaking to think about testing all the water sources in the state for high levels of lead, but I think what we’ve done makes sense — require the testing in schools, because lead contamination hits the children the most,” Harper says.

Her daughter’s own school, in fact, was shown to have high levels of lead in its drinking water as part of voluntary testing done over the past year. In all, the water fountains in more than 300 Chicago Public Schools were tested, and about one-third had elevated levels of lead.

As of December, SB 550 had not yet been passed by the Illinois General Assembly, in large part because of questions of how to pay for the tests (they cost an average of $15 per drinking water sample, according to the Illinois attorney general’s office). Harper says the two mostly likely funding sources are local water suppliers, the schools themselves, or some combination of the two.

In September, New York became the first U.S. state to require all of its schools to test their drinking water for lead contamination. Any schools with contaminated water supplies would then have to implement a lead remediation plan. The state will help fund the local testing and remediation.

Ohio’s HB 512, meanwhile, will require the state’s local water suppliers to test for lead and copper and to map areas being served by lead service lines. The legislation, signed into law in May, also mandates that the operators of public water systems undergo training on how to identify lead in drinking water and control corrosion.

In Michigan, a joint committee of six legislators began meeting in early 2016 and released a final report this fall with more than 30 policy proposals. Its ideas to prevent another situation such as Flint’s include:

- tightening the state’s rules on lead and copper in drinking water, including new standards that would exceed those at the federal level;
- creating an Amber Alert-style system to notify residents of public health emergencies;
- instituting a more robust blood-level screening policy for school-age children;
- providing more funds for the testing and monitoring of water supplies; and
- establishing new competency and experience requirements for the operators of water treatment facilities.

The legislative committee was formed a month after Flint’s water crisis led to emergency declarations by Michigan
Gov. Rick Snyder and President Barack Obama. The six lawmakers (four Republicans, two Democrats) held six hearings and listened to the testimony of more than 60 people.

Their policy recommendations to help Flint residents include creating a “toxic exposure registry” to track the health of residents exposed to tainted drinking water and connect them — particularly children with elevated levels of lead in their blood — to intervention services.

According to the committee’s final report, the percentage of Flint children with elevated blood-lead levels rose from 2.5 percent in 2013 to as much as 5 percent in 2015. The state of Michigan already has been providing support to Flint in a number of ways — replacing old pipes, faucets and lead service lines, for example, and opening new early-education centers and expanding the availability of health screenings.

U.S. Congress sets up new programs to keep lead out of drinking water

Exposure to high levels of lead can have adverse health effects for people of all ages, but it is especially dangerous for young children and the unborn. Behavioral problems, lower IQ scores, hearing and speech problems, and slowed growth have been associated with high levels of lead in the blood, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

One of the national success stories in public health over the past 30 years has been a dramatic reduction in the number of children testing for high levels of lead in their blood. Reasons for the decline have included prohibitions on the sale of leaded gasoline and household paint containing lead.

But the crisis in Flint, Mich., is a reminder that lead contamination also can come from the lead pipes, fixtures and faucets that bring drinking water to residences, day care facilities and schools. Just weeks before it adjourned for the year, the U.S. Congress approved several new measures to help states, local communities and schools do more to prevent lead contamination or mitigate the damage from it. Examples include:

- authorizing $20 million to start a grant program for schools and day care facilities that voluntarily decide to test their drinking water for lead contamination;
- establishing a $60 million-a-year grant program to replace lead service lines, with priority given to financially strained communities that have had high lead levels in their water within the previous three years;
- requiring the U.S. EPA to alert the public within 24 hours (if the state does not do so) of high lead levels in a local drinking water supply;
- providing $15 million a year for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Lead Poisoning Prevention Fund; and
- funding programs to create a lead exposure registry and Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program.

These bipartisan measures were signed into law in December.
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