**Flint immigrants struggle to get help, info on water**

[**Niraj Warikoo**](http://www.freep.com/staff/27767/niraj-warikoo/)**, Detroit Free Press***3:13 p.m. EST February 4, 2016*

An infant plays while holding onto her mother's legs at their home on Flint's east side The spanish speaking woman recently found out three weeks-ago about the Flint water crisis. Ryan Garza, Detroit Free Press

*Some undocumented immigrants in Flint had been denied water at state distribution stations because of an ID requirement later lifted, prompting advocacy groups to mobilize to help get them water*

*(Photo: Ryan Garza, Detroit Free Press)*

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

· **Unable and afraid to get help, many immigrants in Flint need information and clean water**

· **There are an estimated 1,000 undocumented immigrants in Flint, some of whom can't speak English**

When the Flint mother discovered a rash developing on her 11-month-old daughter’s back and legs, she knew something was wrong, but couldn’t figure out why.

Others across the city were discovering similar skin conditions after Flint changed the source of its water. But the 34-year-old woman, an undocumented immigrant from Mexico, doesn’t understand English and was unaware of the problems with Flint’s water.

It wasn’t until three weeks ago that she found out through immigrant friends that her water may be contaminated with lead, potentially harming her, her husband and her four daughters, ages 13, 10, 7 and 11 months.

“I didn’t know about it until recently,” said the 34-year-old woman mother, who asked not to be named because of her immigration status. “I’m worried for my four little girls, especially their health.”

Speaking to the Free Press from her small home on the city’s east side, the woman said she hopes to get translated information so she can help her kids in case they have any lead contamination.

“I need information in Spanish regarding the symptoms,” she said through a translator. “There are a lot of questions we need answers to.”

The woman’s concerns represent the unique challenges facing Flint’s immigrant population, some of whom are undocumented and don’t know English. There are an estimated 1,000 undocumented immigrants in Flint, many from Mexico or Central American countries. Flint’s population is about 1.2% foreign-born, a population whose needs should be met during the water crisis to ensure public health for all, community advocates say.

One problem facing undocumented immigrants is that some of them were turned away from the state’s water distribution at fire stations because they didn’t have a photo ID with them, said immigrants, community activists and state officials. In Michigan, undocumented immigrants can’t get driver’s licenses, and so they often lack an ID.

When some undocumented immigrants were unable to show ID at state-run stations, they were denied water. In other cases, they were afraid to approach the stations because they heard about the ID requirement. Many elderly residents in Flint also lack IDs.

“It is appalling that a basic public service, providing clean water, has become the responsibility of community organizations,” said Ryan Bates, executive director of the advocacy group Michigan United. “The governor should ensure that long-term treatment and medical care are available to all in Flint, regardless of their immigration status.”

**San Juana Olivares Chair of the Genesee County Community Hispanic Collaborative works to gather volunteers and keep track of water deliveries coming into St. Mary's Church in Flint's east side from around the United States on Tuesday January 26, 2016 to be distributed to the residents in her community.** *(Photo: Ryan Garza, Detroit Free Press)*

**Scared to take the water**

A spokeswoman with the state Department of Health and Human Services, Angela Minicuci, confirmed to the Free Press that some immigrants had been denied water because they couldn’t show ID. But, Minicuci said, the state has lifted the requirement, putting out a statement on Jan. 22 saying that no ID is required to get water. She said state workers request IDs or addresses only for water filters, but that if the Flint resident doesn’t have an ID, he or she will still receive a filter.

The initial denials of water in some cases sent ripples of fear through the community of undocumented people, some of whom are now staying away from the distribution of free water, said advocates.

Stepped-up raids this year by federal immigration agents have made undocumented immigrants even more nervous about asking for help and opening the door for strangers. This has caused challenges for reaching them with bottled water, which government agencies and relief groups are attempting to do now in Flint.

“They’re afraid to get water,” said San Juana Olivares, chair of the Genesee County Hispanic/Latino Collaborative, which is helping the community during the water crisis. “They’re still living in fear.”

The group has been canvassing neighborhoods to distribute water and water filters, which the 34-year-old woman got last week for the first time.

On Monday, the state of Michigan put on its help site for Flint residents a two-page water info sheet in Spanish, and smaller info cards in Spanish, Arabic, and Chinese. State workers are trying to hand out those cards when needed, Minicuci said. Also, if residents call 211 for help, they can get bilingual speakers or be put in touch with help in their language, she said.

Flint’s population is about 4% Latino, according to the U.S. census. Community leaders say it it’s closer to 6%. There are also about 42 Arab-American families in the city, some of whom may have been unaware of the water problems, according to the Arab American Heritage Council in Flint.

“Many have language barriers, and some don’t follow local” media, said Mona Sahouri, executive director of the Arab American Heritage Council. “They may be especially vulnerable, some real challenges. ... We’ve been working to identity these families to make them aware of the situation.”

The council also is working on translating documents on water and potential lead contamination into Arabic.

**Many ask: What do I do?**

**FLINT WATER CRISIS**

Religious and other groups have worked to reach out to immigrants to make sure they’re able to get water.

On Flint’s east side, which has a sizable Latino population, St. Mary’s Catholic Church has been distributing water, with no questions asked about ID or immigration status. Further north, at Our Lady of Guadalupe, the majority-Latino Catholic congregation with Spanish-language mass has mobilized to gather water and filters.

“There is a lot of need, especially among the undocumented that don’t have IDs,” said Richard Vasquez, a member at Our Lady who’s coordinating water distribution. “They don’t know what to do. They’re really scared. ... They’ve been turned away, so we decided: Let’s get going.”

Our Lady deacon Omar Odette said of the parish: “It really has been a safe haven here for them.”

Last week, an undocumented immigrant from Mexico in her 20s arrived at the church, desperate to get enough water for her and her baby, he recalled. One problem is that the fire stations give out only one case a day, forcing people to line up every day to get water, which they need for drinking, bathing and cooking.

“She was really fearful,” Odette said. “We loaded her up with whatever she needed. You don’t have to keep coming back. She was able to take care of her baby that night and not have to worry about whether she’s going to be able to bathe her baby.”

Odette said that many in his congregation were late to find out about lead because of language barriers.

“This little boy, he had rashes up and down his arms. The lead is affecting this boy, but the mother spoke no English, and she still didn’t know even after all this” increased attention on the water, he said. After seeing a report on the Spanish-language TV station Univision, the mother came over to the church asking: “What am I supposed to do?”

“When you see kids like that, you pray the lead doesn’t affect them later on,” Odette said.

**Help for undocumented**

**Our Lady of Guadalupe Church deacon Omar Odette and Victoria Arteaga help collect water and filters for Flint residents** *(Photo: Niraj Warikoo, Detroit Free Press)*

Susan Reed, managing attorney with the Michigan Immigrants Rights Center, said there is confusion in the community.

“A lot thought it would be OK if you boil the water, especially those from Latin America, where you boil water from unsafe water supplies,” Reed said. “But boiling is not the answer” and doesn’t remove the lead.

Help for undocumented immigrants has poured in from across the nation, including from Ohio and Texas. Parishioners with a Baptist church in Rhode Island drove all night to Flint to drop off two semi-trucks of water.

Odette said one woman with the Rhode Island group “literally started crying, saying, ‘I just can’t stand it, with the children who are undocumented not getting water.’”

Last Thursday, the state dropped off hundreds of water filters. On Friday, about six cars filled with bottled water from the Jewish community in Michigan, led by the Flint Jewish Federation, dropped off water after hearing that undocumented people weren’t getting access to water. And on Saturday, the Service Employees International Union dropped off water and prayed with the church.

The Flint residents getting help are not just undocumented or Latino; they’re white, black and of diverse backgrounds. Church members load the cars of those in need with water, a filter, jugs of milk, and wet wipes.

At St. Mary’s, parishioners support the church’s efforts to help all, regardless of their immigration status.

“We’re about the human race,” said Mary Kincade, a church member who lives in Flint. “We’re not about whether you’re a citizen or not. We just want to help people who really need it.”

Inside her home in Flint, the 34-year-old woman with four children uses bottled water to cook, make infant formula and wash dishes.

She has a cumbersome process to bathe her daughters: She pours bottled water into a pot to warm on the stove, dumps that in a bucket filled half-way, then adds cooler water to bring the temperature down. She needs to use more water for her older daughters because of their longer hair.

“I’m worried about their health issues later on,” the woman said. “Not just for me, but for other mothers and their children.”

*Contact Niraj Warikoo: 313-223-4792, nwarikoo@freepress.com. Follow him on Twitter* [*@nwarikoo*](http://www.twitter.com/nwarikoo)

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