

UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC WORKS
Washington, D.C. 20510

Hearing April 7, 2004

Testimony by:
Gloria Borland
Dupont Circle Parents

Senators:

I am here because I am the Mother of a 22 month-old girl, who has lead in her blood at twice the national average. I have been a DC resident for 22 years and a homeowner in Dupont Circle for 15 years. Most of the people you see here in the audience today are DC parents worried about lead from the water harming their young children.

Your letter asked me to tell you what we parents believe “would be the most effective way for government to communicate and respond to the sort of information that is now slowly coming to light.” Also, what do we parents “suggest the DC government must do to reinstate the trust of the citizens in their water supply?”

First of all, communication and trust -- those two must go hand in hand.

I'm sure if the Washington Post's David Nakamura had not exposed this scandal, our young children today on April 7 would still be drinking leaded water. And WASA would still be hiding this crisis from us.

Communicating is not rocket science, it is the easiest and simplest thing to do when there is leadership in an organization willing to do it. The problem is not in “the process” of communication, the problem lies in deception. WASA leaders wanted to operate under the radar screen.

WASA has a public relations department right below the chain of command of their General Manager. WASA managers, lawyers, and board of directors made the decision to not communicate truthfully, to cover up and manipulate for years. They deceived us. They tried to hide extraordinarily high levels of lead poison in our water supply, thus putting our young children at risk. The EPA and the Army corps of Engineers went along with this deception, in violation of their federal oversight responsibilities.

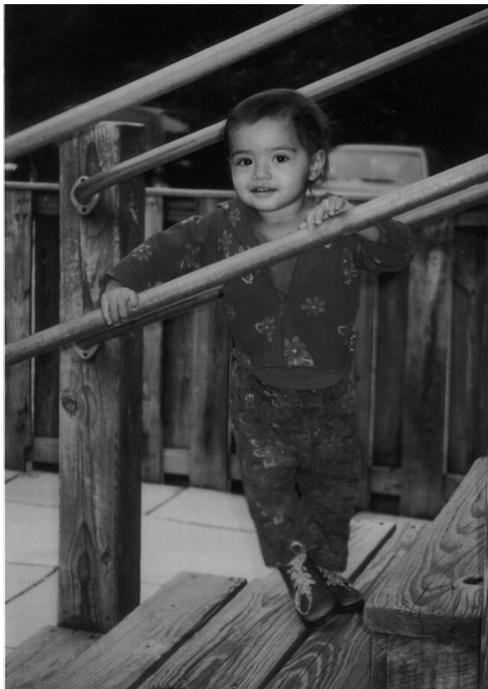
How was this crisis communicated?

For most DC parents of young children, our day of infamy was Saturday, January 31, 2004, when we read the headline of the Washington Post that morning and were hit with the shocking bomb that our infants, toddlers and young children have been secretly poisoned by lead in the drinking water in our homes.

We discovered that lead in the water can stunt fetus' and young children's growth and mental development, and cause learning disabilities. Formula-fed infants may get as much as 40 to 60 percent of their lead exposure from water. Lead in young children lowers their IQ. Lead has a negative effect on children's ability to learn—lowers average IQ 5-15% depending on severity and length of exposure. When lead enters the brain of a child, it causes long-term learning and behavioral problems. Once the baby's brain has been damaged by lead, it is irreversible. Lead can remain in the child's body for decades.

I was pregnant in 2001 and 2002 when high lead levels first became noticed by WASA. The right and legal thing for WASA to do was to issue an emergency warning to the public, and to obstetricians and pediatricians to warn their patients not to drink tap water. It does not matter if WASA hadn't identified the source; that kind of research could take months, even years. In the interest of public safety, you issue the warning to the public to take the precaution, and then you take the time and spend the resources to figure out the cause. When firemen see a house burning, their first priority is to save peoples lives, put the fire out, then they begin their investigation into the cause of the blaze. WASA got it backwards. They wanted to figure out the cause of the lead crisis first, before trying to save our babies' lives.

All WASA had to do was warn me and other mothers, don't drink your water without a filter or buy bottled water. I had a PUR water filter back when I was pregnant. But I wasn't diligent about changing the cartridge all the time. Like most Moms, we drank plenty of water, we were so very careful about everything. I nursed my baby, but I also gave her formula with tap water. When I learned about lead in the water, I wanted to cry. I had been so careful, I even gave up coffee for Gods sake, and now I hear about the lead!



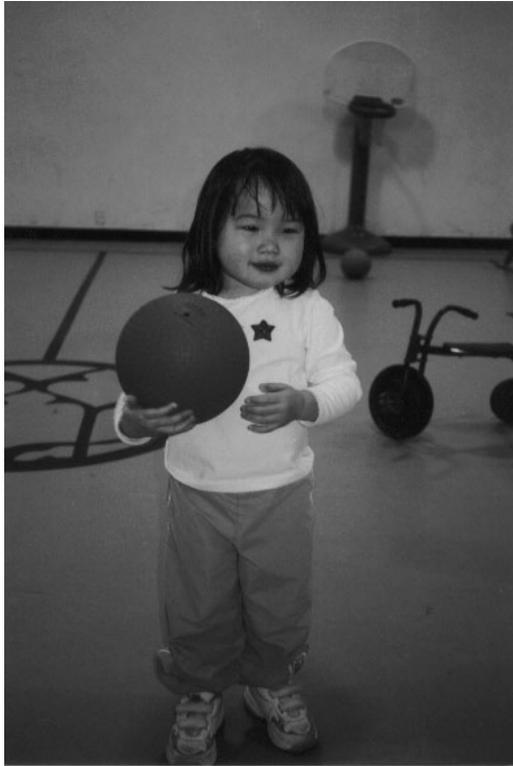
My daughter Imiloa Borland



Pre-school students at Early Childhood Development Center – Dupont Circle

My daughter attends a very good pre-school and day care center in Dupont Circle. The Early Childhood Development Center has an enrollment of 77 students from infants to 4 year-olds and is run by the First Baptist Church at 16th and O streets N.W. When the building was built in 1989, as part of receiving its national accreditation, they had an outside firm test the water. There was no harmful levels of lead in their water and the center passed with flying colors.

Last year, WASA tore up the street next to the center and changed or repaired some pipes. WASA did their construction work without warning and without cooperation with the center. The staff came to work the next day and found the gymnasium floors had been flooded; the mats had to be replaced costing the day care center \$2,000. WASA's work caused a classroom toilet to back up feces, and that room had to be steam cleaned at the center's own expense.



A child playing in the center's gym, where WASA caused \$2,000 in water damage.



My daughter using the bathroom sink at the center



Center Director Mrs. Henderson instructing toddlers to drink from the new bottled water dispenser

When this current lead crisis in the water broke, the center's executive director Helen Henderson did the responsible thing and called back the same private firm to re-test the water in the day care center. Some of the sinks and water fountains had high levels of lead at 3,100 parts per billion and 5,900 parts per billion. When I saw the letter Mrs. Henderson sent to all the parents with the water test results, I thought there must have been a typo. This was not 15 parts per billion, the legal threshold for high lead levels, but in the thousands!!! I couldn't believe the lead in their water almost reached 6,000 ppb!

The center immediately went to bottled water. Brita water filters remove lead up to 150 ppb --- filters don't work when lead is in the thousands.

As of Tuesday April 6, no one from WASA has contacted Mrs. Henderson, nor has anyone from the District government sent her a letter or even made a phone call. Since this crisis broke, no one from WASA or the District has offered to help her. All this talk of the city reaching out to day care centers is baloney.

I know there is some controversy on what are safe numbers: 15 ppb, is it too low, is it too high? I saw the Fox News Channel story last week that the push by environmentalists to crack down on chlorine caused DC lead problems. While scientists can still debate what are proper lead levels in water, there can be no doubt that 5,900 ppb is an emergency! Especially at a Day Care center with 77 young children.

How Could This Have Happened to our Young Children?

Most parents have been perplexed as to why an entity entrusted with public safety would lie, and then cover up their lies; what is their motive? When I spoke over the weekend to my very wise friend Joe Louis Ruffin, III father of a 3 year-old boy, living in Chevy Chase, D.C. Joe said WASA wanted to protect their bond rating. Communicating the truth would have brought their assets down.

So this is like Enron! Enron was only about money. This is about money, bond ratings. But the consequences here, the innocent victims are the lives of our next generation.

I want you Senators to see the victims, our young children, when bond ratings get in the way of public safety. Look into the faces of our babies (see the photos on display): they paid the price for managers who decided bond ratings were more important than our babies brain development, their nervous system and their IQ.

Stories from Parents

Here are some stories from parents all over the city. This lead water crisis has a dramatic impact on every parent of young children. To prove that this is wide spread, there is a petition with over 1,000 signatures from DC parents being presented to the Senate today.



Paul McKay, co-founder of www.purewaterdc.com and his son Finn

When the lead crisis erupted, parents quickly responded by signing a petition on www.purewaterdc.com, that demanded the city take immediate action to restore safety in our water system. The petition also called for the firing of WASA managers and the reinstatement of the whistle-blower, Seema Bhat. The petition was a way for parents to fight back and to let our officials know we were outraged. Over 1,000 signatures were added in just two weeks.



1 year-old, London Brown in her bath...surrounded by the contamination

Theresa Brown lives in LeDroit Park, right near Howard University. She says, “I am the mom of London, she just turned one last week. I am outraged, and would like to know if any of the WASA officials had wives, daughters, daughters-in-law, sisters who were pregnant or had young children during this heinous cover-up and how they feel about allowing their families to be exposed. And if they don’t have relatives or loved ones at risk, then perhaps that explains their ineptitude.

I feel completely and utterly betrayed. They have a responsibility to the citizens of this city, especially to those young babies and children who are completely defenseless. You cannot put a price on brain damage...how about if we deliberately caused brain impairment to their kids or grandkids and see how they like it?”



Hinkle Family

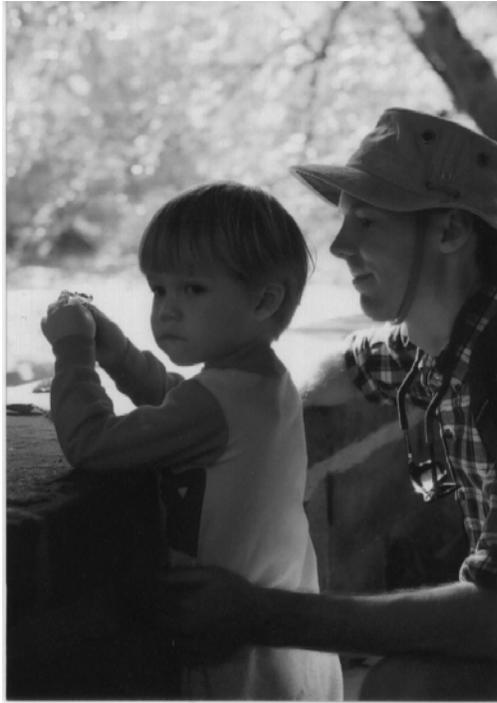
Denise Senecal, Mom from Dupont Circle

“I am writing to express my anger that my family, particularly my two children aged 7 and 3, has been drinking and cooking using contaminated water for an unknown length of time, and that WASA officials knew of this problem but did not inform us. It is unconscionable that these officials allowed families to expose their babies and young children to lead. Over the past four years, my son has been exposed to lead contamination in utero, through breastfeeding, through his formula, and now through even the drinking fountains at his daycare. Can anyone at WASA assure me that my son will not suffer harmful effects from this exposure?”



Desa Sealy Ruffin, son Miles, and Joe Louis Ruffin, III

Desa Sealy Ruffin (wife of Joe, who is mentioned earlier) lives in Chevy Chase, DC. She says, “ I have been so mad that I haven’t really been able to speak all that much. I can only say that I think the District, WASA and EPA have all broken a really fundamental covenant with the citizens in the District of Columbia and I now no longer trust them to do anything. I think they are evil or as a Jamaican friend put it so aptly, wicked. I know a friend was horrified because she was pregnant during this whole thing. The fact that the head of WASA didn’t want to spend the money to replace the lead service lines burns me up beyond belief. I think that the 3 agencies conspired to keep us in the dark. They should be facing criminal charges.”



Charlie Horne and his Dad

Valerie Jablow, mother of Charlie Horne, lives on Capitol Hill and she says, “ I live in a city that is full of taps dispensing water with high lead levels. My son drinks water from his daycare every day of the week, and they don’t know what the lead levels there are. Similarly, we like to go to the libraries, the public pool, stores, and restaurants in our neighborhood all the time—and who knows if the water they dispense is full of lead and thus unsafe to drink? In a few years my son will go to the public school a few blocks from our house—in addition to wondering about the quality of his education, I now will have to worry about the quality of the water he drinks while there.”



Parker Heath-Imiowicz, 16 months old

Terrance Heath is father to 16-month old Parker, living in Logan Circle. Terrance says “ I am writing to express my outrage at the discovery that my family, and particularly our 16 month old son, have been drinking and cooking with water potentially contaminated with lead: I am dismayed because after ten years as a D.C. resident it never occurred to me that my family actually lives in a city where we cannot or should not drink the water; I am outraged because I found out about this potential contamination not from WASA, but from the Washington Post. Our son is adopted, and thus was bottle fed (water mixed with formula) as an infant, and as a toddler. Early this year we learned that his first lead screening result indicated elevated lead level...

....As a D.C. resident and parent, I have no faith in WASA officials to make decisions for the benefit of my family’s health. I believe that oversight is clearly needed, since WASA officials cannot be trusted to do their jobs. Beyond that, I believe that those responsible at WASA should be held accountable for the harm that has resulted or may result from their decisions. There can be no excusing the decision to put our children at risk.”



Ronnette Bristol and her family

Ronnette Bristol, lives in Northeast DC in an apartment building. She has 4 children ranging in age from 3 to 9, and just found out that her building has not been tested for lead. She says “we are buying lots of bottled water, until we can get someone to come out and test our apartment building.”

Ronnette is very worried about the quality of water in her apartment and she wants her children to have the cleanest and safest water possible.



Lyubov Gurjeva and her toddler son

Lyubov Gurjeva is originally from Russia. She says “I never believed DC water was safe to drink. When I arrived in DC two years ago friends told me that there had been numerous problems earlier. But the fact that the situation has been bad for a long time does not make it more acceptable. I am glad this matter has attracted so much public attention this time. We need safer water for DC.”



Xin Chen and her two children

Dupont resident Xin Chen and her husband Brett Sylvester were informed by WASA last August that they had a lead service line and told to test their water. They submitted two sets of water samples for testing on August 15, 2003. They never received their test results. When “the lead story broke out, every time we talked to them on their hotline, we got different answers. Sometimes they told us they lost our samples. Sometimes they said our results were okay but they couldn’t give them to us on the phone, sometimes they simply said we should re-test. We’ve just had the most unpleasant experience with WASA. I don’t trust them and I don’t trust their test results”

Maria DePaul and her husband Ethan Premysler live on Capitol Hill. They have a 3 year-old son and they are expecting the birth of their second child any day now. Their son has elevated lead levels in his blood. They have an exposed basement and they clearly see a lead water main. Maria and Ethan examined their pipes and believe it is an old lead line. When they called WASA, they were told their house was classified with a copper line and not a lead line. Maria and Ethan called numerous times to argue that they did indeed have a lead line and that WASA’s records were wrong. WASA would not budge. Maria and Ethan requested that WASA send someone over to take a look, and see that they indeed had lead pipes, but WASA refused. Ethan says he is completely frustrated, “you are completely on your own, we called so many time, so many times, so many times. WASA will find legal loop holes so they do not have to help you out.”

Many parents complained about the cost of buying expensive filters and bottled water. People don't mind buying bottled water in an emergency for a couple days or a couple weeks. But when a couple weeks turns into a couple months, with still no end in sight, people are beginning to feel the financial burden of buying bottled drinking water for every day use. When parents heard that WASA managers now want to raise rates 5%, they were aghast at the absurdity of the request. This move clearly shows WASA managers still don't get it.

How to Restore Trust

My feeling and that of other parents since that day of infamy is outrage! We expected our elected leaders in the District to quickly step in, fire the managers at WASA and respond with swift action to fix our water crisis. That would have been a rightful first step on the long journey of restoring trust with the citizenry. Instead our District government leaders made the political decision to protect WASA managers, and engage in a finger-pointing game directed at everyone else. EPA and Army Corps of Engineers, were supposed to be looking out for our interest by being the watch dog over WASA. Instead it appears they looked the other way and our children today have to suffer the consequences. I hope EPA and Army Corps leaders remember the faces of our babies when they carry out their daily oversight duties.

Senators, the federal regulations you already have in place for communicating to the public, I think are fine. The problem here was not a failure of process, but a problem of cover up, fire anyone on staff who become a whistle-blower, perhaps to protect their bond ratings.

When I hear Jerry Johnson say "In hindsight, maybe we should've done more to inform people," my blood boils. The pat answer prepared by lawyers and PR people are not going to fool the thousand families who signed that petition. We are not stupid. We know your bond ratings were more important to you than having our babies get lead in their nervous system.

Senators, we are not soccer Moms, or NASCAR Dads, we are a new demographic. We are urban by choice. We're smart, we're parents with young children and because of our children we are involved in our neighborhood communities. We understand the need for companies to make a profit and pay dividends. Many of us own stocks and bonds for our children's 529 college investment plans. But when you endanger the lives of our babies, we are going to fight back with incredible force.

WASA, Don't think by hiring an outside health consultant, we will go away satisfied. We know a PR stunt when we see one. This just reinforces the premise that current managers don't possess the mandatory basic knowledge of "what is safe water to drink", and thus they have no business working in the water industry.

The seed of the problem here is a management culture instilled by Jerry Johnson, Mike Marcotte and board chairman Glenn Gerstell. To restore trust, do what is done in the

private sector, remove managers for extremely poor judgment, failed performance, and put in new management. These are the necessary first step towards restoring trust. New managers are now in place at Enron, Adelphia and Worldcom. Gerstell is a Wall Street attorney, so he understands why old board members at the NYSE had to be replaced in order to restore public confidence in the institution. Martha Stewart maybe going to jail for covering up her lie. This management cover up has caused more damage to the public than Martha: they put the lives of our young babies at terrible risk.

We know our mayor is asking the federal government for more money to solve this problem. I don't think it makes sense to put good money in the hands of bad managers.

Drastic action needs to take place to restore safety in our water supply. I am an entrepreneur and believe in the free enterprise system. So I don't say this lightly. Most of the parents that signed the petition presented to you today also believe in the private markets. We don't normally seek government help for every little problem. But the problems and dysfunction at WASA are so huge, they require federal intervention.

We parents encourage the United States Senate to institute its powers to begin the process of putting WASA under federal control, federal receivership. A new management team and new board of directors needs to be put in place to work on solving this lead crisis. And we need to make sure the Army Corps and EPA are listening to our demands for better communication, a two-way dialogue with the public they are entrusted to serve.

Yes, we need federal help and federal dollars to solve this crisis, but that goes hand-in – hand with new management and federal control of the system, until our water is deemed drinkable again.

Thank you,

Gloria Borland
Dupont Circle Parents

In addition to raising her daughter, Gloria Borland is also a media entrepreneur. She is currently developing a new national television series profiling women entrepreneurs called "*She's the CEO*" www.sheceo.com Gloria was born in Kodiak, Alaska, raised in Honolulu, Hawaii and chooses to live in the Nation's Capitol.