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Testing for childhood lead exposure has not typically included water tests, so when Flint-area physicians earlier this year reported children with higher concentrations of lead, the state had to look at what could cause it, Health and Human Services Director Nick Lyonsaid in an interview. And when it was clear the increased levels correlated with the city's switch to water from the Flint River, the state almost immediately took action, he said. Mr. Lyon also said finding ways of reducing exposure to lead has been a priority of his and the department. The almost unique circumstances surrounding the Flint situation, "is not my issue," Mr. Lyon said. "My issue is how do I reduce the exposure to lead in children of Flint? That's the immediate concern, and then the next concern is, what sort of interventions are needed in the future?"

In one sense, trying to anticipate what future interventions are needed ties into a theme Mr. Lyon stressed repeatedly in the interview, which was how to make the Department of Health and Human Services more proactive and preventative-oriented to help prevent issues from arising.

If, for example, the department can help a family that appears to have problems before a child is abused or neglected, then the child and the family both are spared traumas that could have dramatic effects years later, and the state will save the cost of the intervention system it has to go through, he said.

Mr. Lyon has also overseen the integration and adjustment of the department - a merger of the former departments of Community Health and Human Services - through 2015 and said it had forced him to "drink from the fire hose" as he familiarized himself with all the programs offered and the people who worked for the combined department.

And one of the things he found that impressed him most was the "trust and optimism the employees of both agencies displayed in a great period of uncertainty" that "really gave me a belief we could accomplish a lot," he said.

In looking back at the year, the Flint water situation was not initially something anticipated.

The city in 2014, then under an emergency manager, decided to switch its water system away from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department system as Flint worked on its own water system that would draw water from Lake Huron. As a cost savings measure, the city moved to have its water come from the Flint River in the interim.

Officials in the Department of Environmental Quality said the water had met requirements for safety. And while almost immediately residents complained about the taste, the smell and the appearance of the water, state officials insisted the water was safe.

But DEQ officials, speaking on background, have acknowledged that the department did not anticipate the effects the water could have on the antique plumbing systems, causing them to leach lead.

That was also not something DHHS had anticipated, Mr. Lyon said. DHHS was brought into the controversy late, and specifically because of the issue of whether children exposed to the water were seeing increased lead levels.

Typically, children are exposed to lead in houses with old lead-based paint that chips and flakes and is consumed by children. They are also exposed to lead in the overall environment. Mr. Lyon said typically lead levels rise in the summer when doors and windows are opened more, releasing chips of paint, and kids are playing outside more.

Plus, data on lead level exposure is kept on a county level.

DHHS did not anticipate an issue with lead in water due to antique pipes, Mr. Lyon said. And that proves to be a lesson to the state, he said: When issues of lead exposure come up it may mean the state will also have to check plumbing systems in older houses.

Nor did the state see any significant changes in lead exposure in county data from Genesee County, he said. But Flint-area physicians were reporting higher lead levels in children from the area. "We are never dismissive of the data," Mr. Lyon said. "Data is data."

While saying that now, a department spokesperson told The Flint Journal in September the state had better data than Hurley Medical Center on the question of lead exposure. That spokesperson did say at the time the department was reviewing the Hurley data.

When the state got the reports of the higher lead levels in Flint, DHHS scientists had to look at it. That research showed higher levels in the ZIP Codes where the affected children lived.

And that evidence led to state action. Once he had spoken to the Executive Office about the findings, it began to take steps to reconnect the city to the Detroit system, ensure water filters were distributed and began doing additional testing of exposed children and adults.

In terms of better coordinating services a family or individual may be eligible for, local departments will also play a big role with the state in meeting individual needs, Mr. Lyon said. That will mean overall improved communications between the state and local departments, all with an eye towards recognizing that both agencies are serving the same people.

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