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FLINT WATER CRISIS

Snyder ex-chief of staff: State ignored Flint's lead concerns

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A top aide to former Gov. Rick Snyder took the stand in an Ann Arbor courthouse this week and described his frustrations with state agencies during the height of the Flint water crisis in 2015.

As Flint residents and clergy raised alarm bells about stinky, discolored water flowing from their pipes, Dennis Muchmore said Tuesday their concerns were effectively ignored by the state government.

He wrote as much in a July 22, 2015, email to then-state Health and Human Services Director Nick Lyon: "These folks are scared and worried about the health impacts and they are basically getting blown off by us," Muchmore wrote in the email, which was displayed Tuesday in court. "As a state we are just not sympathizing with their plight."

Muchmore, Snyder's chief of staff, testified before U.S. District Court Judge Judith Levy on Tuesday as part of a trial in a lawsuit filed by Flint residents against engineering contractors Veolia North America and Lockwood, Andrews & Newman, known as LAN.

The so-called bellwether trial is set to determine whether those companies bear responsibility for the lead contamination in Flint's water. The firms' attorneys indicated in opening arguments they intend to show that state and city officials are to blame for the lead crisis because of their "arrogance," "callousness" and "bureaucratic contempt" toward Flint.

Snyder invoked his right against self-incrimination when called to testify in the trial, although he gave a video deposition in mid-2020, which has been shown to jurors. The former governor invoked the Fifth Amendment because he faces two misdemeanor charges of neglect of duty related to the Flint water crisis.

Levy had ordered Snyder to testify, but she didn't hold him in contempt of court because his legal team is appealing her decision to the 6th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals.

More: Former Gov. Rick Snyder pleads 5th in Flint water civil lawsuit trial

Muchmore said he did not know about the issue of high lead levels in Flint's water until July 2015. That month, he attended a meeting with Lyon, Flint residents and clergy in which he became "very concerned" about lead in the system.

Muchmore then sent the email to Lyon urging him to personally look into the issue of lead in Flint's water.

"People keep coming to me because I'm chief of staff, but I don't know anything about water," he said in court. "So I go to (the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality) and ask what the deal is. Somebody can't hold up a bottle of dirty water and tell me it's good to drink. That's just not going to cut it with me.

"So I get kind of irritated about it after a while. I'd been doing the bureaucracy and government for a long time, so I've been danced around lots of times. I didn't think we were getting danced around... The departments were saying 'no ... our evidence says that's not the case.'"

Shortly after Muchmore sent the July 22, 2015 email to Lyon, he received a response from DEQ spokesman Brad Wurfel that indicated public concerns about lead in the city's water system were unfounded, although Wurfel said the lead in people's home pipes could impart some lead into their water.

Flint reconnected to the Detroit water system in October 2015, ending its use of Flint River water. Then-DEQ Director Dan Wyant acknowledged the department violated the federal Lead and Copper Rule by failing to use proper anti-corrosion techniques to prevent lead from leaching into the water.

Wyant and Wurfel resigned in December, 2015, after an independent state task force found the DEQ was primarily responsible for failing to provide safe water to the city.

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