



Tainted Wells

Bringing Clean Water to Prenter

Students Deliver to Families with Polluted Supplies

PRENTER, W.Va., March 29, 2009 /Charleston Gazette/ Contaminated well water in the Prenter area of Boone County go far beyond stained sinks, fried pumps, corroded-out water heaters and clogged filters. Karen Rollo told members of a Lutheran community service group Saturday.

“A lot of people in our area are sick due to the effects of drinking the water,” because of unhealthy levels of manganese, lead, arsenic and iron, said Rollo, a teacher at Sherman Elementary School.

“A lot of the kids who live in the Prenter area and go to school here are affected by the water,” she said.

Rollo was one of several residents to speak to two-dozen volunteers from the Community Lutheran Partners and Lutheran Youth Organization.

They arrived from the Eastern Panhandle, the Morgantown-Clarksburg area and Huntington to distribute 2,000 one-gallon jugs of drinking water. The Lutheran volunteers included adults, high school and middle school students, and a group of Shepherd University students.

Community residents told the volunteers that cancer, kidney disease, gallbladder problems, tooth enamel loss, infertility and skin irritations are among health issues that occur with alarming frequency in the Prenter area – one of the few sections of Boone County not yet connected to city water.

“The only thing we all have in common is that we all drink the same well water,” said Billy Arden of the Sand Lick section of Prenter.

Arden said he is one of six people in the Sand Lick area to develop a brain tumor in recent years. His turned out to be benign and was removed, but three other residents have died from malignant tumors.

“The national average for brain tumor incidences is one for every 100,000 people.” Said Jennifer Massey; a Sand Lick resident, whose brother was one of those who died. “We’ve had six within an area of 10 homes.”

The Prenter area residents said well water problems began to increase dramatically several years ago, after area mines began injecting coal slurry into the ground.

“All the shots that are set off with hilltop mining in the area have been breaking up the rock strata, letting the sludge get into the groundwater,” said Arden.

Well water now stains sinks, tubs and shower stalls orange, causes gelatinous sludge to form in toilet tanks, and often bears an unpleasant odor.

“When I come back from a week of deer hunting in Randolph County, the water in my toilet has gone from clear to black,” said Arden.

Wheeling Jesuit University biology professor Ben Stout, who has been involved with the testing of well water from Prenter, said in December that the water has been “degraded to the point where it is obviously not fit bathing, much less cooking and drinking.”

Before realizing that the water was unsafe to drink, community residents “have been unknowingly exposed to high levels of metals that have well-known human consequences,” Stout said.

Massey said state health officials have agreed to look at a community-produced survey of medical problems in the Prenter area with an eye toward launching a study of their own to determine what role contaminated water may have played in elevated incidences of disease.

Boone County Commissioner Mickey Brown thanked the Lutheran volunteers for their efforts in behalf of the people of Prenter, “who direly need safe water.”

The Boone County Commissioner has kick-started a project to extend municipal drinking water lines from Seth into most of the Prenter area by fronting cash to start construction before grant money arrives.

“You should have city water by the end of this year,” he told Prenter area residents attending Saturday’s program.

After the meeting, the volunteers trucked cases of gallon water jugs into the Prenter area, and then carried the water door to door, distributing 10 jugs per family.

“Thank you so much,” said Rhonda McCormick, as Shepherd student Casey Maxwell and Dana Gustafson of Bridgeport High lifted water jugs over her fence. “This will really help with my cooking.”

McCormick said her 22-year old son, Joshua, has developed kidney cancer and has had one kidney removed, and she is dealing with thyroid cysts. She said she suspects those health issues can be traced to contaminated well water.

“It’s like something out of Erin Brockovich,” said McCormick, referring to the movie starring Julia Roberts, in which residents of a small California town began developing health problems after its water supply was contaminated by pollution from a natural gas compressor station.

“But I never thought the Erin Brockovich story would happen here.”

After the deliveries were complete, the volunteers gathered at St. Timothy’s Lutheran Church in Charleston to reflect on the day and unwind.

“I think we helped the, at least for a little while,” said volunteer Kelly Cunningham of Huntington. “They were very welcoming. It feels good to be helping someone.”

“The fact that their situation seems normal to them is something that struck me,” said adult volunteer Mark Burd of Bridgeport. “And it’s kind of sad that no authority group has come out and said ‘hey, we’ve got a problem here. Let’s fix it.’”

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