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The United States: Remarks by the President After Meeting with Federal Responders on the Flint, Michigan Water Crisis-Food Bank of Eastern Michigan-Flint, Michigan

Asia News Monitor, May 6, 2016

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I just had the opportunity to meet with the federal responders who have been on the ground here in Flint, joined by Governor Rick Snyder and Mayor Karen Weaver. And our discussion underscored how important it was for us to mount a whole-of-government effort across agencies and across levels of government to meet one core mission, and that is make sure that the people of Flint are healthy; that they've got safe water to drink and to use; that we are ensuring that we have a plan for the system to work over the long term; and that we are certain that our kids here in Flint are going to be able to take advantage of their talents and opportunities well into the future.

So we've got a short-term challenge, which is water, but we've also got a long-term challenge, which is making sure that the city of Flint can prosper going forward.

I want to thank everybody who's participating. Everybody here has been working hard on the ground for months now to respond to this crisis. It's an all-hands-on-deck approach. And just to give you some examples of the work that's being done -- FEMA is expanding access to water and filters by providing water commodities to the state of Michigan. The EPA has been actively testing and monitoring the city's water, and is providing technical assistance to the city to make sure that the water distribution system is safe again. The CDC is investigating concerns that we've heard from people about health symptoms that may have been connected to the water.

Some good news -- we're hoping that if it hasn't already happened, that it's going to happen shortly, that legislation is being passed by the state of Michigan that allows the federal government, in partnership with the state, to expand access to Medicaid and provide additional services to individuals under 21. So making sure that our kids are covered and have these additional services, as well as pregnant women. And I want to thank the state of Michigan, working with us, to develop that plan.

Thanks to the USDA, and Debbie Stabenow has been outstanding in guiding this. And obviously the rest of the Michigan congressional delegation have worked hard on this, as well. USDA is making sure that infants get the formula that they need and that children are getting access to healthy food.

There are a couple of things that I want to address to the press directly. I'm going to have a chance after this meeting to meet with a number of Flint families so that they can address directly to me their fears and concerns, as well as their hopes, and then I'll have a chance to speak to a larger audience after that. But a couple of things that I want to focus on right now. Number one is that it is really important, particularly with this expansion of Medicaid, that any parent in the city of Flint takes the time to check to make sure that their kids aren't affected, that they don't have elevated lead levels. And I know that that can be hard. Sometimes folks have difficulty accessing the system. One of the things that we spent a lot of time talking about is how do we make sure that there is enough community outreach so that people know that there are doctors out there and health providers who will see their children.

But I want everybody in the city of Flint to just know that you should have your child checked -- because although lead poisoning or lead impacts can be serious, what is also true is that there are a lot of ways to address whatever concerns are raised and to make sure that those kids are healthy and are thriving. So the key is to know, like any other situation where your kid might get sick or have some sort of environmental impact, you got to know what's going on and then take the steps that are needed to make sure that they get the treatment or the help that they need. And if you don't know, then that could end up leading to problems.

So we're really going to emphasize parents accessing the expanded health care providers that are going to be available here in the city of Flint. That's point number one.

Point number two. I know that there is a lot of suspicion about whether or not the water coming out of people's taps in their homes are safe, or whether they are still contaminated and still a problem. And I want to emphasize that the EPA has looked at this very carefully, and they are very confident that if you use a filter, then it is safe for kids over six. We're still, out of an abundance of caution, recommending bottled water for children who are under the age of six, or pregnant women. But if you're over six, then, in fact, filtered water is safe and it works. And that's not just the opinion of federal agencies. A lot of independent studies have been done to confirm that the water is safe.

So, working with the state and the city, filters are now available for everybody in this city. And the key is for people to go ahead and access them and use them. And I'm going to emphasize this when I'm speaking to the larger audience: I understand why people might be mistrustful and concerned. But right now, it is safe for you to install a filter in your home, or to use a standalone filter and to go ahead and drink that water. But you got to use it. And it's available to you -- for free. But people have to have confidence that will work.

That doesn't mean that we still don't have to replace a number of the pipes in this city. And the mayor is working hard on a plan to fast-track getting pipe replacement. The governor is budgeting dollars to expand that program. And the congressional delegation of Michigan is working hard so that we get additional funds to help replace those pipes that pose a threat. But that may be a long-term process. It may take a year. It may take two years. It might take more to get all the pipes replaced. And in the meantime, folks have to be able to use water. So trust that the tests have been done and the filter system works.

Third point. In order for us to clean out the system, to flush out the contaminants, and to have confidence that, as we fix the system, it's actually going to be safe for all the households in Flint, we need everybody in Flint to start helping us flush out that system. And so I guess there's a program called Flush For Flint. It's not the most elegant name. (Laughter.) But the concept is pretty simple if you think about it, and that is we need everybody to turn on their tap in the kitchen, in the tub for five minutes a day so that the water is running and whatever contaminants are sitting in there start getting pushed out.

And what that allows us to do is then to go back after some water has been running and the flushing has taken place, then the EPA can go back and test some more and see, all right, where are the levels now? How are we doing in terms of coating the pipes? What steps being taken -- are they being effective or do additional steps need to be taken? But we're not going to know that if people just let the water sit there.

Now, I understand if people are scared and they're not using their water, that they may wonder why is it up to me to be part of this process of fixing it. But the bottom line is, is if you're not doing your part, then these outstanding folks around the table who want to help can't do theirs.

So I'm urging everybody in Flint to participate in this flushing program. Again, it's a matter of turning on your tap in the kitchen, in the bathroom, five minutes a day, just to get that water flowing, getting some of the contaminants out. It will then be retested after that.

Now, these are all short-term issues. And one of the things that we all emphasized here is that the city of Flint had suffered from some hard times and neglect long before this particular crisis. And what I'm encouraged by is I think a recognition at every level of government that we have to take what has been a crisis and see if we can turn this into an opportunity to rebuild Flint even better than before.

The problems of water were a symptom of a broader issue, and that is a city that had lost a lot of resources, lost a lot of its tax base, was cutting a lot of services, and increasingly, didn't have capacity. And so our goal here is to use this moment in which everybody's attention is focused to see if we can start rebuilding and moving Flint in a better direction.

I'm confident that we can do that if we're all working together. And I emphasized to the governor and I emphasized to the mayor that my job here today is not to sort through all the ins and outs of how we got to where we are, but rather to make sure that all of us are focused on what we need to do moving forward on behalf of the children of Flint. That's my priority. And that's got to be all of our priorities.

And there are times for politics and there are times for turf battles -- this is not one of those times. This is where everybody locks arms and is focused on getting the job done. And I'm very proud of the team -- Gina McCarthy at the EPA, Secretary Burwell at Health and Human Services, and everybody who is represented around this table. That's their commitment, and that's their order from me. And Dr. Lurie, who's been heading up the federal response, I think has been doing a great job in coordination here.

But all of us are going to have to really keep our eye on the ball, even when the cameras go away. That's what we owe to the people of Flint, and that's what we owe to their kids.

Last point. I think people are understandably scared when they hear that their child may have ingested some lead, it may have gotten into their system, and that that may have some long-term impacts or create particular challenges for kids. But it is really important for all of us to remember that kids are resilient. And every kid in Flint is special, and has capacity, and can do great things. And the fact that they may have had some drinking water that was contaminated doesn't automatically mean somehow that they're going to have huge problems or that they're not going to be able to reach that potential.

And so for the parents who are out there, I want to emphasize: Get your child checked, but be confident that your child can thrive and will be fine as long as you know what they need, and know how to access the resources that they need. It's useful to remember, just to keep things in perspective, that the laws banning lead paint in homes and reducing the lead that was in our environment, those laws really were put in place just a generation ago.

When I was five or six or seven, a lot of homes still had lead paint in it. I might have ingested some lead paint when I was two or three years old, because at the time, people didn't know it. So we've got an entire couple of generations of Americans who have done really well despite the fact that they may have had something that is not optimal. And how lead interacts with any particular child is going to be different, and what each child needs is going to be different. And some kids are going to be fine, and they're not going to be affected. Some kids may have more of an -- it might have more of an effect.

But the bottom line is, is that we now know what to do. We know how to mitigate these effects. But parents and communities have to be proactive in order to assure that we're doing the right thing by our kids. We can't just sit back and feel panicked and feel scared. Those emotions are understandable. But if we want to make sure that our kids are properly taken care of, then we've got to be proactive and get out ahead of this thing.

All right? Thank you again, everybody, for the great work that you guys have done. Thank you, press. I will see you again in the larger rally.

Q Try the water?

THE PRESIDENT: Generally I don't do stunts, but here you go. (Takes a sip of water.) Now, this had a filter on it. The water around this table was Flint water that was filtered. And it just confirms what we know scientifically, which is that if you're using a filter, if you're installing it, then Flint water at this point is drinkable. That does not -- I want to repeat -- negate the need for us to go ahead and replace some of these pipes, because ultimately you want a system in which you don't have to put a filter on it in order to be assured that it's safe.

But as a short-term measure, this is the right thing to do. And, frankly, it's going to be a lot more convenient than people traveling long distances to try to lug back a bunch of bottled water. All right?

Thank you guys.

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