
Clean Water Is Not a Privilege — It's a **Right**

The Lead-in-Water Crisis in Syracuse, NY



When **Lead** Keeps Coming Back

One grandmother did everything right — and the lead kept coming back.

The Discovery

Her grandchild **tested positive for lead poisoning** — inside the home she believed was safe. She channeled the guilt and fear into action.

The Remediation

She completed **full HUD lead remediation** — paint abatement, dust testing, clearance inspections. The home was declared safe.

The Nightmare Returns

Years later, a **younger grandchild tests positive**. The paint was addressed — but the lead is back, and no one can explain why.

This Is Why We Fight: Lead Poisoning Has No Simple Fix

This grandmother did everything right — down to **connecting with other affected families and co-founding an organization** to speak up for families directly impacted. Her story is the reality for families across Syracuse. Families for Lead Freedom Now was created. Because all sources of lead should be eliminated from our homes.

FAST FORWARD TO 2024

Every **Safeguard** Failed

In 2024, Syracuse failed its lead-in-water test — and every agency meant to protect her family missed the lead pipe in her basement.

The Failed Test

EPA testing found **70 ppb lead — 4x the action level**, one of the highest actions levels in the county. Over 14,000 homes identified with lead service lines.

The Missed Line

Her **lead service line was never even examined**. It sat in the basement through HUD remediation, every inspection, and the final clearance — the source of contamination, hiding in plain sight.

Missed by Everyone

The **health department, county inspector, and final clearance officer** all missed it. Every layer of oversight that was supposed to protect this family failed.

The Hidden Poison

Every time she turned on the kitchen tap, that lead pipe **poisoned her family's water**. She did everything right. The system failed her at **every single checkpoint**.



My Why

THE BEAUTIFUL LIE

SOURCE WATER

Skaneateles Lake

One of the cleanest lakes in America. Unfiltered drinking water source for 200,000+ people. So pure, the EPA exempts it from filtration requirements.

VS

YOUR HOME

Your Tap

But once that pristine water travels through a lead service line, it picks up a potent neurotoxin. Clean source water does **NOT** mean clean tap water.

How Lead Gets Into **Your Water**



STEP 1

Pure Source

Water leaves Skaneateles Lake completely free of lead — among the purest in the nation.



STEP 2

City Water Mains

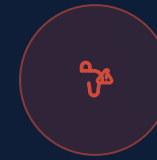
Water travels through city infrastructure. The city adds orthophosphate to coat pipes, but protection is imperfect.



STEP 3

Lead Service Line

At thousands of homes, water passes through lead pipes connecting homes to the main. Lead leaches into the water.



STEP 4

Your Tap

Families drink, cook, and bathe in water contaminated by lead — a neurotoxin with **NO safe level** of exposure.

The Mayor's Response to the 2024 Water Crisis

How Mayor Ben Walsh and the City of Syracuse responded after tests revealed lead levels exceeding Flint, Michigan.

What Happened in Summer 2024

EPA-mandated testing found a **90th-percentile lead level of 70 ppb** — more than 4x the EPA action level of 15 ppb and one of the highest actionable levels in the country. Over **14,000 homes** (~40% of all connections) were identified as receiving water through lead service lines that we know of. Syracuse may have as many 29,000 due to the amount of unknow lines.

Mayor Walsh's Initial Response

Downplayed the results, calling early results “a bit of an outlier.” The city blamed a water department employee for **improperly collecting samples** from outdoor spigots instead of indoor faucets. The mayor emphasized that Skaneateles Lake remains lead-free and that the contamination is localized to older home plumbing.

City Actions Taken

Released a citywide lead service line inventory in October 2024. Pledged to replace **3,000+ lines in the next year** and all 14,000+ lead lines within five years — half the EPA-required timeline. Allocated \$25M for replacements, secured \$22.8M in state LIFT funding and \$7.7M in HUD grants. Adopted an equity-based prioritization model focusing on race, income, and vulnerable populations.

Community & Advocate Pushback

NRDC, NYCLU, and Families for Lead Freedom Now demanded a **state of emergency**. An expert report by Safe Water Engineering found city testing was skewed — only 52% of tested homes in 2024 were confirmed lead-service-line homes, diluting results. Advocates accused city officials of minimizing, misleading, and misrepresenting the scope of contamination, disproportionately impacting Black and low-income communities.

What Has the City **Actually Done?**

Despite bold pledges, Syracuse still lacks a comprehensive lead service line replacement plan that prioritizes already-impacted communities.

What the City Promised

In late 2024, the city pledged to replace **3,000+ lead lines in 2025** and all 14,000+ within five years — half the EPA-required timeline. Allocated \$25M for replacements. Announced an equity-based prioritization model. Released a citywide service line inventory. Hired third-party testing company 120Water after admitting sampling errors.

What Actually Happened

By end of 2025, the city replaced only **~800 lines out of 3,000 promised**. At this pace, full replacement would take over a decade — not five years. The Water Commissioner admitted the city “took on more than it could get done.” The EPA issued an order in Sept. 2025 citing violations in sampling, corrosion control, and public education.

Still No Comprehensive Plan

The city has **no comprehensive replacement plan that prioritizes already-impacted communities**. Up to 16,000 service lines remain with unknown materials. The NYCLU gave the city an “F” grade on lead prevention in Feb. 2026, calling it a failure of legal and ethical obligations. The EPA’s action level drops to 10 ppb in 2027 — and Syracuse has only occasionally met that threshold since 2018. Black children are nearly **9x more likely** than white children to have elevated blood lead levels.

What the Community Is Demanding

In July 2025, Families for Lead Freedom Now, NYCLU, Earthjustice, and NRDC filed a **legal petition demanding the EPA use emergency powers** to force the city to declare a state of emergency, provide at-the-tap filters, launch a public education campaign, and engage communities in creating a lead removal plan that prioritizes the most lead-burdened neighborhoods. “Safe drinking water isn’t a privilege, it’s a right.” — Oceanna Fair, Chair, FLFN

Pushing for a **Better Process**

Families for Lead Freedom Now and our partners continue to demand accountability, transparency, and a community-centered approach to lead elimination.

Families for Lead Freedom Now

Founded by families directly impacted by the lead crisis in Syracuse, FLFN leads the charge for systemic change. Through door-to-door canvassing, community education, FOIL requests, and relentless advocacy, we ensure affected families have a voice at every table where decisions are made about their homes and their children's health.



NYCLU

The New York Civil Liberties Union gave Syracuse an "F" grade on lead prevention and advocates for the legal rights of impacted communities. Their legal expertise and public accountability campaigns keep pressure on city officials to act.



Earthjustice

The nation's premier environmental law organization joined the coalition to file a legal petition demanding the EPA use emergency powers. Earthjustice brings litigation muscle to force systemic change when government agencies fail to protect communities.



NRDC

The Natural Resources Defense Council commissioned the independent expert analysis by Safe Water Engineering that proved city testing was skewed. NRDC provides scientific credibility and national reach to amplify Syracuse's fight for clean water.



"Safe drinking water isn't a privilege, it's a right." — Together, we will not stop until every lead pipe is gone.

 FAMILIES FOR LEAD FREEDOM NOW · SYRACUSE, NY

Community Education & Outreach Proposal

A Neighborhood-First Approach to
Lead Service Line Replacement





Door-to-Door → Education → Protection







How Community Canvassing Works


- 1**  **Neighborhood Canvassing**

Community groups go door-to-door *ahead of contractors*, making first contact with residents before construction begins.
- 2**  **Education on Lead-in-Water**

Explain what lead service lines are, how lead enters drinking water, and health risks — especially for children and pregnant women.
- 3**  **Identify Lead Service Lines**


Help residents determine if their home has a lead service line using city data and visual inspection guidance.

- 4**  **Add to Replacement Lists**

Document every identified home and add it to the official replacement schedule — no home falls through the cracks.
- 5**  **Obtain Homeowner Permission**

Secure signed agreements from homeowners so contractors can complete replacements without delays.

Contractors Arrive Ready to Work

 Permissions secured, homes identified, residents informed — replacements proceed without friction.

Why Community-Led Outreach **Matters**

The case for embedding community groups at the center of Syracuse's lead service line replacement program.



Builds Trust

Residents are more likely to open their doors and engage with neighbors and community advocates than unknown contractors or government workers. Trust is the foundation of participation.



Increases Participation

By proactively reaching residents before contractors arrive, the program eliminates confusion and resistance — leading to higher permission rates and faster replacements.



No Home Left Behind

Systematic canvassing ensures every home with a lead service line is identified and added to replacement lists, preventing vulnerable families from being overlooked.



Empowers Communities

Local groups gain meaningful roles in the solution — creating jobs, building capacity, and ensuring the community most affected by the lead crisis is leading the response.

⚡ Community-led canvassing is not a nice-to-have — it is **essential infrastructure** for a successful lead service line replacement program.

Why Grassroots Community Groups Are Vital

Without community-led organizations, the Syracuse lead crisis would still be hidden. Here's why grassroots power is the backbone of this fight.

They Exposed the Truth

When the city downplayed lead results and blamed “faulty testing,” it was **Families for Lead Freedom Now** that partnered with NRDC to commission an independent expert analysis proving the crisis was real and far worse than officials admitted. Without community pressure, the cover-up could have continued.

They Hold Power Accountable

FLFN, NYCLU, Earthjustice, and NRDC filed a **legal petition demanding EPA emergency action**. Their pressure led directly to the EPA's Sept. 2025 order citing the city for violations. The NYCLU's “F” report card in 2026 kept national attention on Syracuse when officials wanted the story to quietly go away.

They Center the Most Impacted

Government plans treat lead lines as an infrastructure problem. Grassroots groups insist it's a **racial justice and public health emergency**. Black children in Syracuse are 9x more likely to have elevated blood lead. Community groups demand that replacements start in the most burdened neighborhoods — not wherever is most convenient for contractors.

The Lesson from Every Water Crisis: Change Comes from the Community

In Flint, it was community members and local pediatricians who forced government action. In Newark, grassroots coalitions secured emergency water filter distribution. In Syracuse, **Families for Lead Freedom Now is leading that same fight** — door-to-door canvassing, community education, FOIL requests, expert reports, legal petitions, and relentless advocacy. The pattern is clear: when government fails, communities organize. And when communities organize, **change becomes possible**.

Where We Are Now

A new administration, new budget commitments, and continued community engagement offer reasons for cautious hope — but the work is far from done.

A New Mayor, A Fresh Start

Former Mayor Ben Walsh — who the NYCLU said “repeatedly failed” to address the crisis — is out. **Mayor Sharon Owens** now leads the city, and her administration has signaled a commitment to addressing lead in water. The NYCLU has said it looks forward to working with the Owens administration on solutions. This is a critical window of opportunity.

Budget Line: Water Engineer

Budget lines have been added to **hire a dedicated water engineer** to oversee lead service line replacement and water testing — a key step toward professional, accountable management of the crisis. However, this funding is **not yet guaranteed**. The Common Council still needs to approve and preserve this budget line. Community pressure will be essential to making sure it stays.

Continued Dialog

Community advocates are maintaining **ongoing dialog with both the Mayor’s office and the Common Council**. The **NYCLU and Families for Lead Freedom Now** also continue to hold community meetings throughout the city, educating residents on lead in water issues and how to protect their families.

What Still Needs to Happen

The Common Council must **protect the water engineer budget line** from cuts. The new administration needs to deliver a transparent, comprehensive lead service line replacement plan that prioritizes the most burdened neighborhoods — not just the easiest to reach. The EPA’s stricter 10 ppb standard takes effect in 2027, and Syracuse must be ready. Promises alone won’t protect our children. **Only action, accountability, and continued community engagement will.**