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Bottles of drinking water are seen in a hallway at St. Mary's Academy in Hoosick Falls. | Mike Groll/AP Photo

Blood tests cause panic in Hoosick Falls, lawmakers plan no action

By **SCOTT WALDMAN** | 06/08/2016 05:26 AM EDT

HOOSICK FALLS — Rob Allen rushed home from his teaching job on Tuesday to find his wife at home weeping and curled in a fetal position.

She has been upset since four separate envelopes arrived from the state Department of Health the

other day. Each was addressed to one of her children, and the letters said the children have dangerous levels of a toxic chemical in their bloodstream. Their youngest daughter had the highest level of the toxin, known as PFOA, coming in at 112 parts per billion. The median number for 2,000 town residents who were tested was 23 parts per billion.

For almost the baby's entire life, state and village officials had assured the family that their water was safe, Allen said. The children's numbers are higher than their parents', and Allen's wife is concerned that PFOA passed through her and into the bodies of her children.

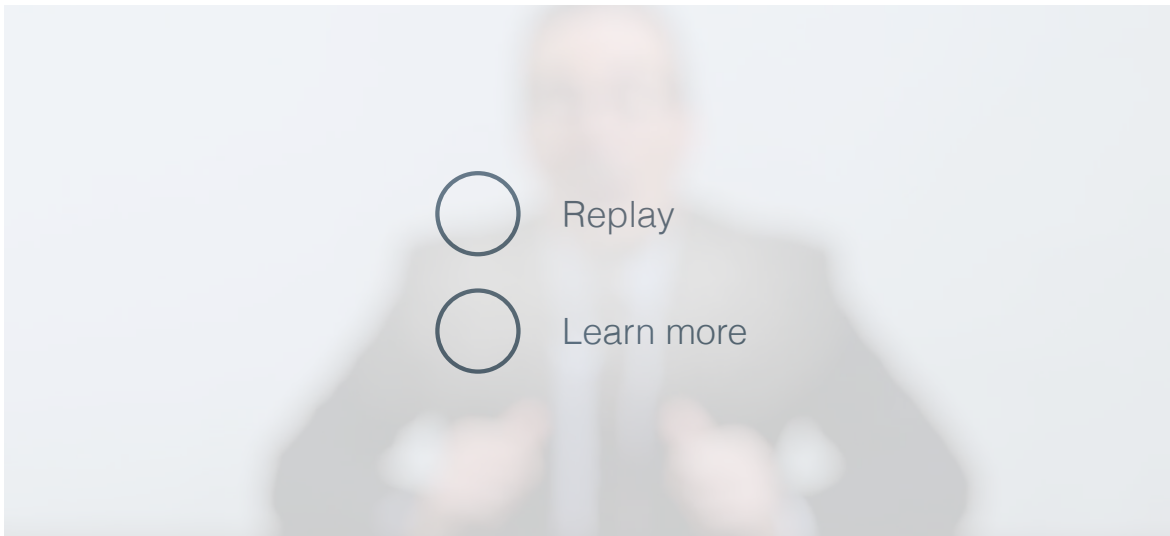
"My daughter was five months old when the village and state knew [about the contamination], and my daughter is 18 months old when the village and state finally said don't drink your water," he said.

In the last few days, people throughout Hoosick Falls have received blood test results back that show far higher results of toxic chemicals in their bloodstream than what the state claims is the mean for the area, which is itself 11 times higher than the national number. People in Hoosick Falls say they are receiving blood tests of that are more than 50 or 100 times the national number.

The median number, 23 parts per billion, may be skewed by the inclusion of town residents with private wells who did not drink the town's tainted water. Ominously, Allen said, among the dozens of people with whom he has spoken in town, young children seem to be displaying far higher numbers than their parents.

Allen said he feels betrayed by Gov. Andrew Cuomo's administration and by elected officials who waited more than a year to warn village residents away from drinking their water, which was tainted with PFOA by nearby facilities that made teflon products.

Other young families, where mothers are breastfeeding their children, have been crushed by the news, particularly those with children who were young enough that they could have avoided the water altogether if state and local officials had alerted the public.



“There is this whole contingent who are devastated, utterly devastated, that that utterly perfect time of nursing a child has been corrupted,” he said. “Now, they’re wondering if they’ve done the right thing. There is so much guilt out there that is [affecting] mothers.”

The issue of PFOA, or perfluorooctanoic acid, in water has become particularly urgent since the federal EPA determined last month that drinking water containing more than 70 parts per trillion of PFOA and PFOS, a related chemical, is harmful to human health. The municipal water supply in Hoosick Falls tested at more than 600 parts per trillion, and the Cuomo administration actively pushed back on EPA warnings that it was dangerous, leaving locals exposed for months. The chemicals are used in industrial manufacturing of non-stick goods, including food packaging, furniture, cookware and firefighting foam.

The dire news emerging from Hoosick Falls in the last few days confirms what many had feared. Hundreds of people, from babies to the elderly, have a dangerous level of toxic chemical in their blood stream. PFOA has a half-life of about three years and there is no known way to expel it from the body earlier. The chemical has been linked to cancer, thyroid problems and high cholesterol, among other issues.

A 45-minute drive away, in the crowded halls of the state Capitol, where lawmakers are looking to wrap up this year’s legislative session, those concerns may as well be happening on another planet.

State lawmakers are poised to leave Albany in a few days without attempting to address one of the state’s most significant environmental crises in years, one in which there is now substantiated

proof that hundreds of people have a dangerous toxic chemical in their system. Planned legislative hearings on water quality issues, which would have prominently featured Hoosick Falls, have been canceled.

On Tuesday, U.S. Rep. Kathleen Rice of Long Island, a Cuomo ally and former co-chair of the Moreland Commission, became the highest-ranking Democrat to call for legislative leaders to hold hearings on how the state and federal government handled the Hoosick Falls crisis.

"I urge leaders in Albany to convene hearings so that we can examine how officials at all levels of government have responded to contaminated drinking water in upstate communities and what must be done to restore access to clean water for residents in those communities," she said in a statement. "We also need to know the full extent of PFOA contamination across the state — how prevalent these chemicals are in our public water supplies, what other communities may be at risk, and what we can do to eliminate that risk before people suffer the consequences."

In Hoosick Falls, the blood tests results raise significant questions about what other towns like Hoosick Falls have yet to be discovered in New York, and what the state's plan is to identify them and mitigate the pollution.

Hoosick Falls certainly is not the only community now facing PFOA contamination in New York. The town of Petersburg nearby also had dangerous levels of PFOA in its municipal water supply. Last month, Newburgh city manager Michael Ciaravino declared a state of emergency and shut down the city's primary water supply. Ciaravino made the decision, which was in defiance of Mayor Judy Kennedy, because the water has tested positive for a high level of PFOS, or perfluorooctanesulfonic acid, which is similar to PFOA. The city water supply, which recorded a level almost three times the new federal safety limit of 70 parts per trillion, first tested positive in 2014. As with Hoosick Falls, elected officials did not significant action there until Ciarvino took a stand.

The Newburgh pollution may have come from a firefighting foam used at the nearby Stewart International Airport, though an exact cause has yet to be determined. The federal government is conducting tests at military installations across New York, but it's not clear how long that will take. In the meantime, the state has not released a plan for testing them or checking nearby water supplies that may be missed by the military.

Cuomo has repeatedly characterized his administration's handling of the Hoosick Falls crisis as aggressive. He recently dismissed POLITICO New York's reporting of his administration's

pushback against federal regulators who raised concerns about Hoosick Falls as a “political he-said, she-said.”

That news about the blood tests arrived just before close of business on a Friday, when governments tend to release bad news, and is the closest the Cuomo administration has come to acknowledging a misstep in its handling of Hoosick Falls. Just a few weeks before, the administration used the same time slot to put out a statement on the pending federal investigation of Cuomo’s upstate economic development plan.

The administration’s handling of the crisis in Hoosick Falls may raise significant medical questions, experts say. The administration has not released the full range of results, simply telling reporters that the results range from “non-detect” to “greater than 200 parts per billion,” which is far below some of the high numbers residents are saying they received. By refusing to publicly release the full scope of test results, without names attached, the administration has also made it hard to draw conclusions from those results, experts say.

The state should show residents the geographic distribution of test results, to target areas where exposures may be higher and so they can determine where their own results fit, said Richard Klapp, a professor of epidemiology at the Boston University School of Public Health. For medical professionals, it’s important to have the full range of results.

“The most important thing is to give the range of results they found and then give the national pattern,” Klapp said. “If there are other communities where there is public contamination, how does Hoosick Falls compare to that.”

For instance, looking only at the full range of numbers, which includes hundreds of residents on private wells who were not exposed to PFOA, will make the median much lower. The totals for the village, where residents have much higher results, are certainly far higher. The state’s unwillingness to release the full scope of the material makes such important calculations impossible.

On Monday and Tuesday, in the state Capitol, there was little desire to talk about the Hoosick Falls water crisis, or what steps could be put in place to protect other communities around the state from a similar situation.

Senate GOP Majority Leader John Flanagan walked away from a reporter on Monday rather than answer a question as to why he had not called for legislative hearings into water quality issues around the state. On Tuesday, Basil Seggos, acting commissioner of the Department of

Environmental Conservation, left his bag behind because he skipped out of a committee hearing so quickly before a reporter could ask him questions.

A bipartisan group of lawmakers holding a press conference on a new bill that would expand testing for lead in school water supplies bristled when asked whether Hoosick Falls situation required that the legislation be broadened to include other contaminants. They ended the press conference shortly after reporters started asking about Hoosick Falls.

When the session ends June 16, most lawmakers will rush home to begin their re-election campaigns.

NOTE: The original version of this article has been updated to specify the administration's language in describing the range of PFOA levels detected in residents' blood tests.

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