NEW ORLEANS OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

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NEW ORLEANS S&WB SHOULD STRENGTHEN LEAD SERVICE LINE REPLACEMENT PROGRAM TO MEET FEDERAL DEADLINES, PROTECT PUBLIC HEALTH

The New Orleans Office of Inspector General (OIG) today (Oct. 21) released a public letter recommending that the Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans (S&WB) bolster its lead service line (LSL) replacement program to comply with pending federal deadlines and better protect public health.

Today's letter is a follow-up to the OIG's 2017 evaluation of S&WB policies and procedures regarding infrastructure work that may involve partial replacement or disturbance of LSLs. The 2017 report, titled *Lead Exposure and Infrastructure Reconstruction*, included findings and recommendations to reduce the risk of lead exposure in drinking water resulting from infrastructure reconstruction projects. The report warned that disturbing aging LSLs can increase the risk of lead exposure through household drinking water and urged the S&WB to adopt stronger safeguards and communicate more clearly with the public regarding potential lead exposure.

This follow-up letter reviewed the status of the S&WB's actions to implement our recommendations.

Finding 1: Resident Notification and Lead-Risk Communication

Our 2017 report found that the City and S&WB had neither alerted residents to the risk of increased lead exposure in water from the partial replacement or disturbance of LSLs, nor provided them with information to reduce that risk.

Our follow-up found that the S&WB partially implemented the 2017 report's recommended steps to develop and implement a strategic health initiative to reduce exposure to lead in water from LSLs. These steps included:

- Public Education and Communications Strategies – Partially implemented
  - The S&WB did not develop a comprehensive, strategic, and persuasive public education plan, but did enhance its communication regarding lead awareness, including adding a Lead Awareness page to the S&WB website.
- Advance notification of impending LSL repairs – Implemented
- Detailed instructions for flushing service lines – Implemented
- Distribution of water filter kits and refills – Partially implemented
  - S&WB customers can request a water filter pitcher by phone or the S&WB website. However, pitchers must be requested and were not automatically provided when LSLs were disturbed, only partially fulfilling this recommendation.
- Water quality testing post-LSL replacement or disturbance – Partially implemented
  - While the S&WB allows customers to request free testing kits and has conducted more than 2,500 tests, the service remains customer-initiated, so the recommendation is only partially implemented.

Finding 2: Coordination, Testing, and Lead-Service Line Management

Our 2017 report found that the City and the S&WB had not developed a long-term lead reduction strategy that included encouraging and supporting property owners in replacing privately owned portions of LSLs.

Our follow-up found that the City and the S&WB had partially implemented the OIG's recommendation to develop a long-term strategy for lead reduction, including public education and funding toward full replacement of LSLs.

- Public education of the benefits of full LSL replacement – Partially implemented
  - S&WB has added information related to full LSL replacement to their communications, but is in the process of finalizing a formal communications plan for its LSL replacement program.
- Funding of full LSL replacement – Partially implemented (pending voter approval)
  - Through proposed Constitutional Amendment 7, on the Nov. 3 ballot, Louisiana voters will determine whether public funds can be used to replace LSLs on private property.

OIG review of S&WB's response to new federal regulations

Since our 2017 report, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) 2021 Lead and Copper Rule Revisions (LCRR) and 2024 Lead and Copper Rule Improvements (LCRI) have significantly expanded regulations regarding lead in drinking water.

The new federal guidelines give water agencies like S&WB until Nov. 1, 2027, to submit a baseline inventory of all service lines along with a finalized plan for fully replacing all lead and galvanized requiring replacement (GRR) service lines under their control by December 2037. The updated rules also lower the lead action level and strengthen sampling protocols. Together, these requirements have increased the urgency and volume of LSL replacement work that the S&WB must complete.

The OIG reviewed a draft copy of the S&WB's LSL Replacement Plan and concluded the plan was likely compliant with the LCRI's requirements for what water systems must include in their plans. Although the S&WB's customer-initiated water testing did not fully meet the OIG's recommendation for proactive testing, it did align with LCRI requirements.

Inspector General Ed Michel stated:

"The S&WB has improved its baseline service line inventory and customer notifications, but has not yet implemented the full, proactive outreach and financial support strategies as the OIG recommended in 2017. These gaps will become increasingly urgent as federal rules now require full replacement of all lead and GRR lines by December 2037. The transition of the S&WB to City control comes at a pivotal moment, creating a single point of accountability as these deadlines approach. Full implementation of the OIG's recommendations remains essential for meeting federal mandates and protecting public health."

To view the OIG's letter, visit NolaOIG.gov.

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