



Highlights of [GAO-04-974T](#), a statement to the Subcommittee on Environment and Hazardous Materials, Committee on Energy and Commerce, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Concerns have been raised about lead in District of Columbia drinking water and how those charged with ensuring the safety of this water have carried out their responsibilities. The 1991 Lead and Copper Rule (LCR) requires water systems to protect drinking water from lead by, among other things, chemically treating it to reduce its corrosiveness and by monitoring tap water samples for evidence of lead corrosion. If enough samples show corrosion, water systems officials are required to notify and educate the public on lead health risks and undertake additional efforts. The Washington Aqueduct, owned and operated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, treats and sells water to the District of Columbia Water and Sewer Authority (WASA), which delivers water to D.C. residents. EPA's Philadelphia Office is charged with overseeing these agencies.

GAO is examining (1) the current structure and level of coordination among key government entities that implement the Safe Drinking Water Act's regulations for lead in the District of Columbia, (2) how other drinking water systems conducted public notification and outreach, (3) the availability of data necessary to determine which adult and child populations are at greatest risk of exposure to elevated lead levels, and what information WASA is gathering to help track their health, and (4) the state of research on the health effects of lead exposure.

The testimony discusses preliminary results of GAO's work. GAO will report in full at a later date.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO--04-XXT.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact John Stephenson at (202) 512-3841 or stephensonj@gao.gov.

DRINKING WATER

Safeguarding the District of Columbia's Supplies and Applying Lessons Learned to Other Systems

What GAO Found

This statement discusses GAO's preliminary observations and highlights areas of further examination.

One of the key relationships in the effort to ensure the safety of the District's drinking water is the one between WASA, the deliverer of water, and EPA's Philadelphia Office, which oversees WASA's compliance with drinking water regulations. Recent public statements and corrective actions by these parties clearly indicate that coordination and communication between them could have been better in the years preceding the current lead controversy. GAO's future work will examine (to the extent appropriate) the interrelationships among other key agencies (such as the Aqueduct and the D.C. Department of Health); how other water systems in similar situations interacted with federal, state, and local agencies; and what the experiences of these other jurisdictions may suggest concerning how improved coordination can better protect drinking water in the District of Columbia.

Other water systems facing elevated lead levels used public notification and education practices that may offer lessons for conducting outreach to water customers. For example, some of the practices of the two water systems we have begun to examine – the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority and the Portland (Oregon) Water Bureau – include tailoring their communications to varied audiences in their service areas, testing the effectiveness of their communication materials, and linking demographic and infrastructure data to identify populations at greatest risk from lead in drinking water.

WASA faces challenges in collecting the information needed to identify District citizens at greatest risk from lead in drinking water. Specifically, WASA has partial information on which of its customers have lead service lines, and is in the process of obtaining more complete information. GAO's future work will examine the efforts of other water systems to go one step further by linking data on at-risk populations (such as pregnant mothers, infants, and small children) with data on homes suspected of being served by lead service pipes and other plumbing fixtures that may leach lead into drinking water.

Nationally, much is known about the hazards of lead once in the body and how lead from paint, soil, and dust enter the body, but little research has been done to determine actual lead exposure from drinking water, and the information that does exist is dated. In our future work, we will examine the plans of EPA and other organizations to fill this key information gap.