



promoting progressive public policy for Texans with disabilities

May 17, 2016

Office of the Governor
P.O. Box 12428
Austin, Texas 78711-2428

Re: Lead Levels in State Supported Living Center Drinking Water

Dear Governor Abbott:

Texas has 13 State Supported Living Centers (SSLC) that house individuals with disabilities. This week during a quarterly test for lead we became aware that the Brenham, El Paso and San Angelo SSLCs had toxic levels of lead in their drinking water. The Brenham facility alone contained 18 times the amount of lead that is considered unsafe for human consumption. Unfortunately, we do not know how long these residents have been drinking poisonous water and the Disability Policy Consortium feels strongly that greater efforts need to be made to ensure the health and safety of the residents at these SSLC facilities.

Texas Disability Policy Consortium (DPC)¹ is an independent group of disability advocacy organizations committed to promoting the rights, inclusion, integration and independence of Texans with disabilities. DPC is made up of 21 members of statewide and local disability organizations. The Consortium provides an ongoing forum for analysis and discussion on important disability issues in Texas including the health and safety of Texans with disabilities. We are particularly concerned with the recent findings of lead in the three SSLCs facilities and are asking that you take appropriate steps to ensure the health and safety of the Texans that reside at the Brenham, El Paso and San Angelo SSLCs. Please consider the following measures:

1. Every resident in the Brenham, El Paso, and San Angelo SSLCs should be offered an opportunity to transition into the community or to move to another SSLC that did not test positive for toxic lead levels. These individuals and their loved ones deserve to have the peace of mind that they are not drinking poisonous water.
2. We appreciate the efforts of the SSLCs to train their staff to recognize symptoms of lead poisoning. The DPC, however feels strongly that every current and recent resident should also receive a blood test. The effects of lead consumption range from permanent intellectual disability to headaches, poor appetite to vomiting, loss of balance and seizures. Many of these effects are conditions that the current population already have or exhibit, and because a large portion of the population cannot communicate changes in their conditions, allowing staff

¹ <http://www.disabilitytx.org/>

to wait and observe side effects is not sufficient. We are unsure for how long there have been toxic lead levels in the water at these facilities and know that this population presents unique health conditions that can put them at greater risk. If an individual has lead poisoning, they deserve to be diagnosed, treated, and moved to safety immediately.

3. The taxpayers cannot afford to pay for more infrastructure band aides for these crumbling facilities. Each year the state allocates millions of dollars in deferred maintenance for the 13 SSLCs and still, they cannot provide basic health and safety conditions, like safe drinking water. In 2014, the Austin SSLC also had toxic lead levels in its water. Please take the longer view regarding alternatives to spending precious state dollars to repair these facilities that continue to drain Texas resources. Instead, we urge the state to seize the opportunity to increase capacity to provide support services for individuals with disabilities with complex needs in their local communities. Imagine how far those resources could go toward high quality community services if the SSLC daily rate of \$856.00 were available to support SSLC residents in the community, including pay for highly skilled direct support professional wages commensurate with extra training and competencies to provide more complex medical and behavior supports.

Thank you for your attention to this very important health and safety scare. The DPC looks forward to working with you on solutions so this does not happen to Texans with disabilities in the future regardless of where they live. Despite the significant decline in residents, the cost to fund this system continues to increase. It is time for Texas to use its limited resources wisely and not continue to sink funds into a system that cannot even provide safe drinking water. We urge responsible use of limited funds by closing and consolidating archaic SSLCs and reinvesting the cost savings into a sustainable system that allows real choice of high quality community-based services for all, including those with significant disabilities. We ask that you and the Texas Legislature prioritize integration, quality of life and wellbeing of all Texans by reforming the system of care for Texans with disabilities.

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Jon Weizenbaum, Commissioner Department of Aging and Disability Services