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Barack Obama

Speech to Community of Flint, Michigan

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All right. Let me do some business here. Let me begin by recognizing some of the guests who are here. Your mayor, Karen Weaver, is here. I know Governor Rick Snyder is here.

No, no -- because here's here to -- we're doing some business here. Members of Congress are here, including your outstanding senator, Debbie Stabenow. Flint's own Dan Kildee is here. Debbie Dingell is here. Brenda Lawrence is here. John Conyers is here. And Sandy Levin. An outstanding Michigan delegation. We've got Secretary Sylvia Burwell, who is the head of Health and Human Services, works for me. And Administrator Gina McCarthy is here, as well. I want to thank Superintendent Bilal Tawwab -- and Principal Tim Green for their hospitality. And I want to thank all of you for being here.

Now, not too long ago, I received a letter from a young lady, an eight-year-old girl named Mari Copeny. You may know her as "Little Miss Flint."

Those of you who have seats, please feel free to sit down so folks can see behind you. If you don't have a seat, don't sit down.



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And like a lot of you, Mari has been worried about what happened here in Flint. She's worried about what it means for children like her. She's worried about the future of this city and this community.

So in the middle of a tragedy that should have never happened here in the United States of America -- the denial of something as basic as clean, safe drinking water -- this eight-year-old girl spoke out and marched and, like many of you, protested. As Mari was getting ready to hop on a bus to Washington, she wrote to ask if she could meet with me while she was in town. There she is.

Now, I would have been happy to see Mari in Washington. But when something like this happens, a young girl shouldn't have to go to Washington to be heard. I thought her President should come to Flint to meet with her. And that's why I'm here -- to tell you directly that I see you and I hear you, and I want to hear directly from you about how this public health crisis has disrupted your lives, how it's made you angry, how it's made you worried.

And I just had a chance to meet with a few of your neighbors in a roundtable discussion, and I heard from them what I know a lot of you are feeling: That a lot of you are scared. That all of you feel let down. And I told them that I understood why you'd be afraid -- not just for yourselves, but for your kids.

I also wanted to come here, though, to tell you that I've got your back -- that we're paying attention. So I met and heard directly from those who are leading the federal response and who are working hard to make sure that Flint is whole again, to make sure that this proud city bounces back not just to where it was, but stronger than ever. And I want all of you to know I am confident that Flint will come back. I will not rest, and I'm going to make sure that the leaders, at every level of government, don't rest until every drop of water that flows to your homes is safe to drink and safe to cook with, and safe to bathe in -- because that's part of the basic responsibilities of a government in the United States of America.

So as President, I've sent Flint the best resources our federal government has to support our state and local partners. The agencies that serve you -- the agencies that specialize in health and housing, and those that support small businesses and our kids' education; those that are responsible for the food that our children eat and, of course, the water we drink. Everybody is on duty. The National Guard is on duty. This is a hands-on-deck situation -- all hands on deck.



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Because if there's a child who feels neglected on the north side of Flint, or a family on the east side of this city who wonders whether they should give up on their hometown and move away, or an immigrant who wonders whether America means what we say about being a place where we take care of our own. That matters to all of us -- not just in Flint, not just in Michigan, but all across America. Flint's recovery is everybody's responsibility. And I'm going to make sure that responsibility is met.

So I just talked with some of the team of responders that are on the ground to make sure that they're coordinating. And they're doing some incredible things. They've distributed enough water to fill more than three Olympic-sized swimming pools. They've distributed thousands of filters. They're helping students afford nutritious food that work against the contaminants in bad water. They're making sure new moms have access to instant infant formula that doesn't require water. They've expanded health services for children and pregnant women, and education programs for Flint's youngest children. They're out there testing homes for lead and testing children for exposure to lead.

But like all our best responses in tough times, this is not a government effort alone. We need our businesses and nonprofits and philanthropies to step up. And what's incredible about Flint is how many volunteers have already been leading the way. You've got members of one union, UA Local 370, that have donated tens of thousands of dollars and 10,000 hours of their time. They've installed thousands of filters, hundreds of faucets by going door to door, night and day. They're not asking for anything in return, they're just doing the right thing.

So many Americans, here in Flint and around the country, have proven that you don't have to be a plumber or a pipefitter to pitch in -- although it's very helpful if you're a plumber or pipefitter. So, in March, dozens of accountants teamed up with the American Red Cross to help residents recycle all the plastic water bottles that have been piling up. Religious and community groups are organizing supply drives, supporting families, offering free medical services.

The director of a local dance studio, I understand, found a creative way to help; she's letting people use her studio as a space to support one another by sharing their stories and realizing they're not alone. Even inmates at an Indiana prison came together to donate more than \$2,500 to the people of Flint. And a second-grader from Virginia, a young man named Isiah Britt, set up a website to see if he could raise \$500 for hand sanitizers to send to the kids at Eisenhower Elementary here in Flint. So Isiah, it's fair to say, surpassed his goal, because he raised \$15,000. And he explained that the experience taught him just because you're small "doesn't mean you can't do big things."



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So when you think of all those stories, it should be clear that the American people care about Flint. The American people are paying attention and they care about you. And as is true when disasters strike in other ways, people pitch in, they come together. Because they imagine, "All right, that could have been me." That's the good news.

The bad news is that this should not have happened in the first place. And even though the scope of the response looks sort of like the efforts we're used to seeing after a natural disaster, that's not what this was. This was a manmade disaster. This was avoidable. This was preventable.

Now, I'm not here to go through the full history of what happened. Like a lot of manufacturing towns, Flint's economy has been taking hits for decades now -- plants closing, jobs moving away. Manufacturing has shrunk. And that's made it harder for the city to maintain city services. And let's face it, government officials at every level weren't attentive to potential problems the way they should have been. So they start getting short-staffed, they start getting a shrinking tax base, more demand for services. Things start getting strained, and there's not enough help from the outside. And then when Flint's finances collapsed, an emergency manager was put in place whose mandate was primarily to cut at all costs. And then some very poor decisions were made. All these things contributed to this crisis. Many of you know the story.

Now, I do not believe that anybody consciously wanted to hurt the people in Flint. And this is not the place to sort out every screw-up that resulted in contaminated water. But I do think there is a larger issue that we have to acknowledge, because I do think that part of what contributed to this crisis was a broader mindset, a bigger attitude, a corrosive attitude that exists in our politics and exists in too many levels of our government.

And it's a mindset that believes that less government is the highest good no matter what. It's a mindset that says environmental rules designed to keep your water clean or your air clean are optional, or not that important, or unnecessarily burden businesses or taxpayers. It's an ideology that undervalues the common good, says we're all on our own and what's in it for me, and how do I do well, but I'm not going to invest in what we need as a community. And, as a consequence, you end up seeing an underinvestment in the things that we all share that make us safe, that make us whole, that give us the ability to pursue our own individual dreams. So we underinvest in pipes underground. We underinvest in bridges that we drive on, and the roads that connect us, and the schools that move us forward.



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And this is part of the attitude, this is part of the mindset: We especially underinvest when the communities that are put at risk are poor, or don't have a lot of political clout -- and so are not as often heard in the corridors of power.

And this kind of thinking -- this myth that government is always the enemy; that forgets that our government is us -- it's us; that it's an extension of us, ourselves -- that attitude is as corrosive to our democracy as the stuff that resulted in lead in your water. Because what happens is it leads to systematic neglect. It leads to carelessness and callousness. It leads to a lot of hidden disasters that you don't always read about and aren't as flashy, but that over time diminish the life of a community and make it harder for our young people to succeed.

In one of the roundtables, I was listening to somebody -- I think it was a pastor who told me, you know, it made us feel like we didn't count. And you can't have a democracy where people feel like they don't count, where people feel like they're not heard.

And that attitude ignores how this country was built, our entire history -- which is based on the idea that we're all connected and that what happens in a community like Flint matters everybody, and that there are things that we can only do together, as a nation, as a people, as a state, as a city that no man is an island.

We've been debating this since the Republic began: What are our individual responsibilities and what are our collective responsibilities. And that's a good debate. But I've always believed what the first Republican President, a guy named Abraham Lincoln, said. He said we should do individually those things that we do best by ourselves. But through our government, we should do together what we can't do as well for ourselves.

So it doesn't matter how hard you work, how responsible you are, or how well you raise your kids -- you can't set up a whole water system for a city. That's not something you do by yourself. You do it with other people. You can't hire your own fire department, or your own police force, or your own army. There are things we have to do together -- basic things that we all benefit from.

And that's how we invested in a rail system and a highway system. That's how we invested in public schools. That's how we invested in science and research. These how we invested in community colleges and land grant colleges like Michigan State.



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Can I get some water? Come on up here. Give me some water. I want a glass of water. I want a glass of water. Sit down. I'm all right. I'm going to get a glass of water right here. Let's make sure we find one. It will be filtered. Hold on, I'm going to talk about that in a second. Settle down, everybody.

Where was I? We invested in our communities and our cities. And by making those investments in the common good, we invested in ourselves. That's the platform we create that allows each of us independently to succeed. That's what made America great.

So the people in Flint, and across Michigan, and around the country -- individuals and church groups and non-for-profits and community organizations -- you've proven that the American people will step up when required. And our volunteers, our non-for-profits, they're the lifeblood of our communities. We so appreciate what you do.

But volunteers don't build county water systems and keep lead from leaching into our drinking glasses. We can't rely on faith groups to reinforce bridges and repave runways at the airport. We can't ask second-graders, even ones as patriotic as Isiah Britt who raised all that money, to raise enough money to keep our kids healthy.

You hear a lot about government overreach, how Obama -- he's for big government. Listen, it's not government overreach to say that our government is responsible for making sure you can wash your hands in your own sink, or shower in your own home, or cook for your family. These are the most basic services. There is no more basic element sustaining human life than water. It's not too much to expect for all Americans that their water is going to be safe.

Now, where do we go from here?

Well, I'm still waiting for my water. Somebody obviously didn't hear me. Usually I get my water pretty quick. Hold on a second.

Now, the reason I know I'm okay is because I already had some Flint water. There we go. I really did need a glass of water. This is not a stunt.

Now, I'm going to talk about this. Everybody settle down. This is a feisty crowd. Hold on a second. All right, everybody settle down. I got some serious points to make here.



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So where do we go from here? Now, Mayor Weaver has a plan to fix the pipes in Flint. And unfortunately, because the state initially cut so many corners, it's going to end up being more expensive -- much more expensive now than it would have been to avert the disaster in the first place. But the good news is that Michigan does have funds it can use from the federal government to help Flint. The Governor indicated that in his budget he has put forward additional funds to replace the pipes. In order for it to happen -- and I said this to the Mayor and the Governor; I had them both in my car, the Beast -- I told them I wasn't going to let either of them out until we figured this out. I had Secret Service surrounding everybody.

But what I said was, is that the city and the state and the federal government, everybody is going to have to work together to get this done. So it's not going to happen overnight. But we have to get started. We have to get the money flowing. We've got to work with our plumbers and pipefitters, but also train local residents and start getting apprenticeship programs going -- so that even as we're trying to deal with this disaster, we're also hopefully lifting people up and giving them an opportunity for employment. Congress, led by your congressional delegation, needs to act in a bipartisan fashion, do their job, make sure Flint has the necessary resources.

And so it's long past time that Flint has a well-managed, monitored, modern water system that protects not just against lead, but other contaminants. All right? So that's our goal. That's one goal.

But we've got to do more than just ensure the integrity and safety of your water for the long term. What we also have to do is work as one team -- federal, state, and local leaders, Democrats and Republicans -- to address some of the broader issues that have been raised by this crisis. The federal officials I met with today are committed to staying on the job until we get it done. But that requires the state of Michigan to step up and be fully invested in this process, as well. Today's vote in Lansing to increase funding for health care was a good start.

But part of keeping the faith with the people of Flint means making sure that you're first in line for the jobs this effort will create. It means that since the state voted this afternoon to expand Medicaid, every child who lived in Flint while the water was bad needs to be able to get seen by a doctor, diagnosed, make sure that there's follow-up. We can't just promise it, we've got to deliver it. And that means everybody has got to cooperate. Everybody has got to cooperate.



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And keeping the faith with you also means the state has to step up and deliver the resources that will help not only fix the water, but transform Flint so that it is once again a functioning city with the capacity and the democratic structures to work. The city government has to be on a firm foundation. The mayor can't do it by herself. She's got to have a team and a staff, and there's got to be a budget that works, that's sustainable, and a plan for long-term economic development, and a plan to make sure that health care is available to all of our kids, and a plan to make sure that education is top-notch in this city, and that more jobs are being created. And that will require many more of the good work that we've seen from citizens and community groups who care about your families.

But it's not enough just to fix the water. We've got to fix the culture of neglect, the mindset I was talking about -- that has degraded too many schools and too many roads and hurt too many futures. We've got to fix the mindset that only leaves people cynical about our government. Our government is us -- of us, by us, for us -- the people.

So we've got a lot of work to do. But I'm here to tell you I'm prepared to work with you on this. I'm paying attention.

Now, a couple of specific things I want to address. These aren't in my prepared remarks, but this is what I gathered from the conversations that I had.

I'm in Flint right now, not Detroit. But I do love Detroit. And their school needs support, and there is -- some of that same mindset has hurt the schools there.

But listen up, because this is drawn from the conversations I had with many of your neighbors and friends, as well as the federal response teams that I sent out here a while back. We're going to do everything we can to accelerate getting new pipes here in Flint. But even with all the money, even with an efficient, speeded-up process, it's going to take a while for all the pipes to be replaced. It's not going to happen next month. It's not going to happen six months from now, where all the pipes in Flint are going to be replaced. We've got to get started, and you need to see that it's getting started and that progress is being made. But it's not going to happen overnight. Even if we get all the plumbers and pipefitters, and we get some more apprentices trained -- even if we do all that, it's going to take some time.

And so one of the things I heard talking to a lot of your neighbors is, boy, right now it's rough just trying to figure out how to get bottled water on the way home from work, and you're trying to just shower real quick, and people are still concerned about what's safe and what



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information is correct and what is not. So I do want to just tell you what I know, based on not just what I've been reading in the papers, but what our top scientists have told me.

The first is that while you are waiting to get your pipes replaced, you need to have a filter installed, and use that filter. And if you do use that filter, then the water is safe to consume for children over the age of six and who are not pregnant.

Now, hold on a second. Don't just start shouting, okay? Because this is the problem -- we're going to have to solve this problem. And if people don't listen to each other, then it's not going to get fixed.

So I'm telling you -- and I promise you, I'm really good at stirring folks up. So if I want to just come here and stir folks up, I know how to do that. But that's not actually going to solve the problem, all right? So I'm telling what I know, because I guarantee you that the scientists who work for me, if they tell me something -- which I'm saying in front of all those cameras -- turns out to be wrong, that person will not have a job.

So although I understand the fear and concern that people have, and it is entirely legitimate, what the science tells us at this stage is you should not drink any of the water that is not filtered. But if you get the filter and use it properly, that water can be consumed. That's point number one.

And you can get those filters free, and people will help install them if you need help -- particularly seniors who may have trouble going back and forth and trying to get a whole bunch of bottles of water and so forth. So that's information that I trust and I believe. That's point number one.

Point number two: Every child in Flint who may have consumed water during the course of this tragedy -- and that is the overwhelming majority of children here -- should get checked.

Now, the reason that's important is because lead is a serious issue. And if undiagnosed and not dealt with, it can lead to some long-term problems. But -- and this is really important, so I want everybody to pay attention -- if you know that your child may have been exposed and you go to a health clinic, a doctor, a provider, and are working with them, then your child will be fine. And the reason I can say that with some confidence is not just based on science, but based on the fact that keep in mind that it wasn't until the '80s where we started banning lead in paint, lead in toys, lead in gasoline.



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So if you are my age, or older, or maybe even a little bit younger, you got some lead in your system when you were growing up. You did. I am sure that somewhere, when I was two years old, I was taking a chip of paint, tasting it, and I got some lead. Or sometimes toys were painted with lead, and you were chewing on them.

Now, I say that not to make light of the situation. We know now what we didn't know then, which is it can cause problems if children get exposed to lead at elevated levels. But the point is that as long as kids are getting good health care, and folks are paying attention, and they're getting a good education, and they have community support, and they're getting some good home training, and they are in a community that is loving and nurturing and thriving, these kids will be fine. And I don't want anybody to start thinking that somehow all the kids in Flint are going to have problems for the rest of their lives, because that's not true. That is not true. And I don't want that stigma to be established in the minds of kids.

We've learned a lot of things since I was a kid. I used to have adults blowing smoke in my face all the time. We didn't use seat belts. We wrapped dry-cleaning bags around us and thought that was funny. Folks didn't know. No, no, but the reason I think this is important is because I heard from a lot of folks who were saying how moms and dads were feeling guilty. They're feeling sad. They're feeling depressed. Oh, Lord, what's -- how is this going to affect my child. And it's right to be angry. But you can't get passive. You can't just suddenly sit back and sink into despair. Our kids will be fine, but you have to now take action. Don't wait for somebody else to reach out and ask whether your child has gotten a checkup recently. We just expanded Medicaid. Go take your child to that doctor. Use that health system.

And so community organizations, churches, et cetera, one of the things that we need to do is -- and I've talked to the Governor and the Mayor about this -- is set up a system of outreach so that we're getting everybody as a village looking out for every child, making sure that they're getting checked up, making sure they've got pediatric care, making sure they're being tested effectively, making sure then that they're getting nutritious food.

Just to give you an example, we know that if kids are getting vegetables and eating properly - that, just by itself, is going to have some impact on any effects of lead. But I know that here in Flint there are whole neighborhoods that don't even have a supermarket. So we're going to have to figure out how to get supermarkets in those communities. And in the meantime, we got to help make sure that those kids are getting the nutrition they need.



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So I say all this just to indicate you should be angry, but channel that anger. You should be hurt, but don't sink into despair. And most of all, do not somehow communicate to our children here in this city that they're going to be saddled with problems for the rest of their lives. Because they will not. They'll do just fine, just like I did fine with a single mom, and a lot of you did fine growing up in a tough neighborhood. They'll make it as long as we're there for them and looking after them, and doing the right thing for them and giving them the resources that they need. Don't lose hope. Don't lose hope.

I talked longer than I was going to. But I feel strongly about this whole issue with kids now. Kids rise to the expectations we set for them. A lot of kids in Flint already got some crosses they got to bear. They've already got people telling them, oh, it's too tough for you because you're black or you're poor. They will do fine as long as we do right by them. And that's my intention. And set high expectations for them.

Just a couple more points. What happened here is just an extreme example, an extreme and tragic case of what's happening in a lot of places around the country. We've seen unacceptably high levels of lead in townships along the Jersey Shore and in North Carolina's major cities. We've seen it in the capitals of South Carolina and Mississippi. And even, not long ago, lead-contaminated drinking water was found right down the street from the United States Capitol.

So Flint is just a tip of the iceberg in terms of us reinvesting in our communities. We've seen bridges fall and levies break. So we've got to break that mindset. These things aren't a coincidence. They're the same mindset that left Flint's water unsafe to drink. And it's self-destructive when we don't invest in our communities. Because a lot of times the people who are against government spending, they'll say, well, the private sector is the key. The private sector is the key for our economy. Free markets and free enterprise are great. But companies won't invest in a place where your infrastructure is crumbling and your roads are broke. You're not going to start a business or be able to recruit outstanding staff if there's no safe drinking water in the city.

So my hope is, is that this begins a national conversation about what we need to do to invest in future generations. And it's no secret that, on this pipeline of neglect, a lot of times it's the most poor folks who are left behind. It's working people who are left behind. We see it in communities across the Midwest that haven't recovered since the plants shut down. We see it on inner city corners where they might be able to drink the water, but they can't find a job. We see it in the rural hills of Appalachia.



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We've got to break that mindset that says that that neighborhood over there, that's not my problem; those kids over there, they don't look like my kids exactly, so I don't have to worry about them -- out of sight, out of mind. We've got to break that attitude that says somehow there's an "us" in "them," and remind ourselves that there's just one big "we" -- the American family, and everybody has got to look out for each other. Because the kids here in Flint aren't "those" kids, they're "our" kids. That's what Scripture teaches us. But I'm not going to start preaching in front of some pastors.

So let me just close by saying this. Look, I know this has been a scary time. I know this is disappointing. You've been let down. But there is a sermon about a phoenix rising from these ashes. And there is the opportunity out of this complete screw-up, this painful tragedy, this neglect, this disappointment to actually pull together and make for a better future.

Sometimes it takes a crisis for everybody to focus their attention. Because there have been a lot of crises going on in Flint; they just weren't as loud and noisy, and nobody noticed.

There are a lot of small, quiet crises going on in the lives of people around this country. And this helps lift it up.

And when we see it, and we understand it, and we feel it, then maybe we start making a connection with each other. And that begins to change our mindset and improve our politics and improve our government to make it more responsive and more accountable. And the good news is, is that that's the natural mindset of our young people. That's why I'm so hopeful about the people of Flint. That's why I'm so hopeful about America generally, is I meet young people all the time, and they've got a mindset just like Little Miss Flint here. She decides, I'm just going right to the President, because I think we can fix this. Or the mindset of Isiah raising \$15,000 to help an elementary school where he's never been.

That's America. That's who we are at our best. We are a nation of individuals, and we should be proud of everything that we can accomplish on our own through hard work, and grit, and looking after our own families, and making sure we're raising our children right. But we don't do these things alone. Ultimately, our success is dependent on each other. Our success is dependent on each other.

I have had the privilege of being the President of the United States, a big office -- an office that gives me enormous power and enormous responsibility. But the thing I've learned in that job is that I can't do it by myself. I can't fix every problem on my own.



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I need a mother-in-law who helps Michelle and me raise Malia and Sasha. I need incredible staff who are carrying out our policies to sign people up for health care. I've got to have our incredible men and women in uniform who are willing to go overseas and fight on behalf of our freedom. I've got to have governors and mayors who are willing to work with me to get things done in their states and in their cities.

And, most of all, I need fellow citizens who share the values that built this great country and are willing to work with me and work together to make it better. I said this before: The most important office in a democracy is the office of citizen. It's more important than the President. More important than any senator or governor or mayor. It is the idea that each of us has something to contribute, each of us has something to give back.

So, Flint, I'm here not just to say I've got your back. I'm here not just to say that you will get help. I'm also here to say you've got power. I'm also here to say you count. I'm also here to say that you can make a difference and rebuild this city better than ever. And you'll have a friend and partner in the President of the United States.

God bless you. God bless Flint. God bless Michigan. God bless the United States of America.