



## OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

# News Release

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### **EPA Office of Inspector General identifies that EPA staff did not elevate significant issues in Benton Harbor's water system**

WASHINGTON – The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Office of Inspector General today issued a [report](#) identifying that the EPA did not follow its 2016 *Policy on Elevation of Critical Public Health Issues* when responding to evidence of drinking water lead contamination in the community water system for Benton Harbor, Michigan.

The audit determined that, in addition to lead level exceedances, the community's water system was cited by the state for additional drinking water violations, including a significant deficiency violation notice regarding water system managerial oversight, insufficient revenue, treatment, distribution, monitoring, and reporting issues. Michigan issued an Administrative Consent Order to address these deficiencies. These enforcement actions, combined with the elevated lead levels, indicated that there were larger public health risks because the water system was not operating in a manner that ensured it was providing safe drinking water to residents.

Although EPA Region 5 staff monitored the state and local response to these issues, they did not use the elevation policy to alert the EPA's Office of the Administrator to the potential health risks to Benton Harbor's residents. For the elevation policy to enhance public health and environmental protection, the Office of the Administrator should determine how this policy can more effectively achieve its purpose in situations like Benton Harbor.

"The conditions in Benton Harbor met four of the policy's five criteria for elevation," said EPA Inspector General Sean O'Donnell. "That this situation was not raised for higher levels of attention led us to question what circumstances would be elevated under this policy."

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