

Environmental Health and Equity Series: Water Rights, Health, and Justice Part 1

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Isabelle Birt (IB): Welcome to Ideas for Practice, a podcast for the Region V Public Health Training Center. As one of 10 public health training centers across the country, the RVPHTC seeks to strengthen the skills of the current and future public health workforce, in order to improve population health outcomes. We hope this podcast will share insights and spark ideas among those working in public health practice. Thank you for tuning into our podcast. Today, we'll be talking about water, environmental health and equity. I'm your host Isabelle Burke. In this episode, we'll be gaining insight into the public health issues related to water pollution and water access, and how this is intimately linked to structural racism and health inequities. Our guest today is Emily Kutil, a designer, educator, researcher, and activist with We The People of Detroit. Welcome to the podcast, Emily. I'm so excited to talk with you today and learn more about your experiences.

Emily Kutil (EK): Thanks for having me.

IB: So just to start off, do you mind telling us a little bit about yourself, then about your work?

EK: Yeah. So I am a researcher and a designer, I'm trained in architecture and I'm also a member of We The People of Detroit. We The People of Detroit is an activist organization that was founded by five black women in, I believe, 2008. Debra Taylor, Cecily McClellan, Chris Griffith, Aurora Harris, and the president, Monica Lewis Patrick. And I met Monica when I was part of an organization called Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management, in 2014. And at those meetings we were talking about how to respond to the mass water shutoff crisis in Detroit. And We The People of Detroit really took an early leadership role in the water shutoff crisis, both in advocating for water affordability and really becoming a leading voice and advocacy. But also in creating an emergency response plan. We The People of Detroit created water stations all over the city, where people could get access to water if their water had been shut off. They also created a hotline, a water rights hotline, where people could call if they were shut off or if they were at risk of being shut off. And We The People of Detroit would help them navigate all of these complex and inadequate assistance programs that exist within the water department. And so when I met Monica, they were in the middle of organizing these massive citywide canvassing efforts, and setting up these water stations. And Monica was looking for someone who could work with them to map where water shutoffs were happening, so that they could really strategize. That was the origin of our work together as the research collectives. That was in 2014. Now, we've been working together for eight years, and we have a large interdisciplinary team of researchers.

EK: And we work together to do research and analysis about the water system, and also about public education, and land ownership, housing development, and really looking at how all those things overlap and affect each other in Detroit, as it relates to public policy. We do research for lots of different reasons, in lots of different contexts. We provide public education materials, we provide information for community organizing, we provide research for policy work and legal work. We also work with national, international allies to really build a larger movement around water affordability. And as I will talk a lot more about, we work with public health officials and public health researchers to really make a public health argument for water affordability.

IB: Thank you for sharing that, and for sharing a little more about We The People of Detroit. So the UN actually recognizes water as a human right. What does this mean to you?

EK: Well, really, water as a human right is kind of like something that we all intuitively understand, I think. We need water to survive, it is necessary for human life, for human survival. And so really, water as a human right, is just a basic statement of that necessity. And that every human being has a right to safe and affordable access to water.

IB: Yeah. Yeah. Well said. So this human right to water, everyone deserves it, but how is this affected by systems of privilege and oppression?

EK: Yeah, I think... So across the world, if we're thinking about the United Nations systems, there's so many different ways that privilege and oppression impact access to safe and affordable water. But in our context in Detroit, we are really looking at the overlap between structural racism, racial segregation, economic segregation, and the way that that maps onto both our physical infrastructure. So how our physical infrastructure functions, and actually works geographically. And then, also how that maps onto the political systems that actually manage and run the water system. And so there's all kinds of ways that geography and space starts to impact who lives where, who has access to what portion of the infrastructural systems that we build to deliver water to people. And these kinds of ongoing legacies of racist segregation and racial inequality in our region have profoundly shaped the human right to water in Metro Detroit.

IB: So what is the historical context for these inequities? Particularly, in our region.

EK: The City of Detroit has one of the largest water supply and wastewater infrastructure systems in the country and also in the world. We have a water system that supplies water to about 40% of Michigan's population. It was actually built by the City of Detroit. It was not built by any kind of like suburban regional collaborative group. It was not funded by the suburban communities that surround the city, it was actually built and paid for by the City of Detroit. And this is unusual. Most American cities have water infrastructure that mostly kind of stays within the city limit. That's right. And so it's such an enormous water infrastructure that was sort of built and operated by the City of Detroit, that's delivering water across places right to the City of Flint, an hour's drive away from Detroit, all part of the Detroit regional water infrastructure system. And really the reason why this infrastructure was built by the city of Detroit in the first place was because when the city was expanding rapidly, right throughout the 20th Century, the suburbs didn't have the money, the capital to build their own infrastructure, they just couldn't afford it. The only entity around that could afford to supply water to these expanding suburbs was the City of Detroit, and so they went to the City of Detroit and petitioned them to expand the regional system. And at the time there was actually a moment in this history where the Director of the Water Department Lawrence Lenhart says, "This will kill the city. If we continue to expand this infrastructure and to facilitate that kind of movement of people and capital outside of the city of Detroit, using this water infrastructure, this will undermine the kind of fundamental stability of our city systems." And he was right. Water infrastructure, the expansion of the regional water infrastructure system in Detroit did just as much, if not more, than the freeway system, to really subsidize and facilitate suburban sprawl and White flight out of the city of Detroit. And I think this is the kind of history in a context that people don't really understand, the kind of original debt that the suburbs owe to the city for their very existence, and really what has happened in during that history in the past... Now it's sort of over a 100 years, 140 years of the existence of the Detroit water system, is that there's been this kind of constant struggle between the suburbs and the city over the control of the water system itself. This struggle has also mapped onto many different forums of injustice in our region because of the sort of heavily racialized nature in which suburban sprawl happened, because of the way that both private entities, people working in real estate development and also public entities like the federal government, state and local governments, actually set things up to create segregation. So we have this situation where we have this racialized tension between the suburbs and the city over control of the region's water.

EK: And one of the narratives that kind of emerges is this myth that is really propagated by suburban leaders, that the city of Detroit is price gouging the suburbs for water, that it's kind of taking advantage of the fact that it owns and operates the water infrastructure. And so the suburbs sort of create this belief, or suburban leaders create this belief that the city is taking advantage, that it is really kind of extracting resources from the suburban communities, when in reality that... The real situation is that it's kind of slipped. That the suburban communities are receiving this kind of resource that is essential to their very existence from the City of Detroit. One of the things that we have researched, We The People of Detroit Community Research Collective is actually looking at the rate structures between the suburban communities and the city, to really try and kind of unpack some of the myths and misconceptions that have been created around how water rates work in our region, and how the water infrastructure functions. And so what we did is we collected like a whole series of studies and information about water rates in suburban communities, and in the City of Detroit, and compared them. And what we learned is that DWSD for almost its entire existence, would sell water to its residents, to City of Detroit residents at a retail rate. So what you normally see on your water bill, but it would sell water to the suburban water authorities and really the suburbs were basically band together and create these purchasing authorities so that they had a better bargaining power with the city, so they could negotiate lower rates. The City of Detroit sells water at a wholesale rate to that water authority, and then the water authority is reselling the water at retail rates to its own residents. And so these water authorities are responsible for maintaining their own local infrastructure. So the City of Detroit has these big regional water mains that get sent... That send the water to the suburban communities, and then the suburban communities have their own sort of smaller local system that distributes water to individual households. And so what we learned when we studied the water rates and really started to understand this kind of wholesale versus retail relationship between the city and the suburbs is that many suburbs were marking up their water rates to enormous numbers. In some cases we found that some suburbs were marking up their water a 1000%.

IB: Wow.

EK: So that they would purchase water from the City of Detroit, and then resell it to their residents and their local suburban community.

EK: And so we really discovered that this idea that the City of Detroit is price gouging the suburbs is false and is being used to sort of divide people in the suburbs from people in the city, and create this kind of misunderstanding about where the power really lies in the management of our regional water system. Okay, so this was the situation, this kind of wholesale retail relationship for almost the entire existence of the Detroit Water System, but in 2014, The Great Lakes Water Authority was created, which totally changed the way that our regional infrastructure functions. So The Great Lakes Water Authority is a regional entity, which has leased the regional water system from the city of Detroit, so they pay an amount every year to sort of rent that system, and now The Great Lakes Water Authority is responsible for the treatment and distribution of the system. So if you look at the kind of scope of this long power struggle over control of the region's water, in 2014, the suburbs took over control, there is now a majority suburban board that runs The Great Lakes Water Authority whereas in the past, the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department that were [0:14:45.1] ___ Water commissioners right is a majority Detroit Board. And so this kind of center of power shifted from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department to the Great Lakes Water Authority. So how did this happen? What happened to create this kind of shift from the City of Detroit owning and operating the regional water to this suburban majority entity called the Great Lakes Water Authority owning and operating the regional water. This happened during the Detroit bankruptcy. In March 2013, the City of Detroit was placed under emergency management by the Governor of the State of Michigan at the time, Rick Snyder, who appointed a man named Kevyn Orr to become the emergency manager of the City of Detroit. And the emergency manager law in Detroit is highly controversial. It is a law that allows for the state of Michigan to appoint emergency managers over city governments that are having some kind of financial issue. And if the financial problems in that city government meet a certain threshold, the state can sort of impose this manager that can come into the city and has complete control over the city's government. And these are not democratically elected officials, these are not democratically elected officials, they are appointed by the state governor. And so we have this kind of undemocratic take over of the City of Detroit's government, which happened in 2013. So in March, Kevyn Orr is appointed, by July he declares bankruptcy on behalf of the City of Detroit, and again, this is not a decision that's made by Detroit's City Council, by the Detroit Mayor, it is made by this undemocratically appointed Emergency Manager. And it unleashes chaos in the city in many different ways.

EK: One of the things that we see happening immediately with the water system after the declaration of bankruptcy is suddenly, we have this mass spike in water shut offs, and the city of Detroit has shut off water for decades. There is an organization called The People's Water Board, which has really worked for decades to get the City of Detroit to implement a water affordability plan. And so there have been shutoffs for a very long time in the city, but typically we never see more than, say, 1000 maybe 2000 a month, that kind of like the peak shut off times, and that is already too much, nobody should have their water shut off because they can't afford to pay for water

IB: I was going to say that is pretty high.

EK: But after the city declares bankruptcy, suddenly we are seeing those numbers triple quadruple, 3000 a month, 4000 a month, these huge numbers, the city has so many water shut-offs to conduct that it actually hires a private demolition contractor called Homrich Wrecking company to go around the city and shut off water. One of the most important reasons that the city used to justify this mass water shut offs campaign during the bankruptcy is that they created this kind of narrative that people in Detroit just don't wanna pay their bills, and they're buying cable, they're paying their cellphone bill but they won't pay their water bill, and so we have to really discipline these people and force them to pay and teach them that they have to, right? Or we'll punish them by shutting their water off. So this is the kind of narrative that Kevyn Orr, that the City of Detroit creates, the director of the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, Gary Brown. All of these people are participating in creating this kind of understanding of water shut offs where people who actually are unable to afford these massive water bills in the city of Detroit get blamed. Right? The narrative is that it becomes their fault. They have chosen to put themselves in this situation, when what we know on the ground is that is just not true. Water rates have risen dramatically in the past decades in Detroit. We pay some of the highest water bills in the country, even though we sit on the Great Lakes, we're directly connected to 20% of the world's fresh water.

IB: So it sounds like a lot of misunderstanding and just not recognizing the history of water in Detroit and how privilege and oppression played into the way that people had or did not have access to water was a big deal in the water crisis. And I think this is also relevant to Flint as well, which kinda leads to our next question of, Why is it important for the public to be informed about their water and their water rights?

EK: So the way that I am thinking about this, on a kind of large scale, is that these kinds of systems of structural oppression, structural violence work. They have power because context is erased and removed from the situation. We don't have these kinds of historical understandings of inequality and racism to inform, you know the kind of present day or we don't understand how our infrastructure functions, we don't understand the kind of regional power relationships at play. And so we are vulnerable to being misinformed. We hear things on the radio, we hear people talking about it, we take them at their word and we don't have this kind of context to help us think critically right about what is actually going on with our water systems. And if we don't understand them, if we're not informed, we can't act, we can't have an impact on these things that are happening that are so important for our human survival, as a region, as a species, we have to be informed. We have to understand how these systems function so that we can make them better and make them actually work for us so that we can survive. And I think this is, this is, you know one of the things that, that I always try and talk about when I'm talking about the Detroit water crisis is its connection to the Flint water crisis. And many people don't understand that these stories are actually connected to one another. They're part of the same story. And it goes back to emergency management, which we were just talking about a minute ago. So when, when the City of Detroit was placed under emergency management and when mass water shutoff started in Detroit, the City of Flint was also under emergency management. And actually the City of Flint had been under emergency management for over a year when this when the emergency manager was appointed in Detroit. So we have this situation where the two largest black majority cities in the state of Michigan are being managed by state appointed emergency managers that have total control over the city government and all of its contracts. And remember that Flint is part of the Detroit water system, the regional system right goes all the way to Flint and also to many of the suburbs surrounding Flint. And we have this narrative that the City of Detroit is price gouging, right? It's kind of suburban customers. So, so this, this myth is really weaponized by the emergency managers of the City of Flint and the City of Detroit to really shift some of these power relationships that are at play in our suburban water system. So here's the timeline, July 2013, Kevyn Orr declares bankruptcy on behalf of the City of Detroit. Immediately we see mashed water shots spiking, thousands more water shutoffs than we've ever had before. A year later in April 2014 the City of Detroit realizes it just doesn't have the capacity to conduct all of these water shutoffs by itself. So it hires a private water contractor or a private demolition contractor Homrich Inc right to shutoff water.

EK: And this is to anybody who's 45 days late or \$150 overdue on their water bills. So the threshold is actually quite low to have your water shut off. That same month, the City of Flint is taken off of the DWC system, and it begins drawing water from the Flint river. And what happens is, Flint is the city of Detroit the DWSD, Detroit Water and Sewer Department, Flint is DWSD's largest customer. Because it's the biggest city on the system, right? It is way bigger than any other city on the Detroit system. And so this contributes to a further destabilization of the water department's finances, while the city is in bankruptcy and creates kind of financial mayhem within the water department. And so we have to understand this as a kind of connected story, because that instability, that financial instability was then leveraged to justify the creation of the Great Lakes Water Authority, this regional, suburban majority entity that now controls the regional system. And so I think that's such critical context, right? Because all of these reckless decisions that were made by emergency managers, to you know put the water infrastructure for the City of Flint on the Flint river and, and therefore to poison the people of the City of Flint with lead and other heavy metals in their infrastructure, the decision not to treat that water properly in the way that all, you know, municipal water officials know is necessary. That decision is inextricably connected to this effort to take over control of the regional water system from the City of Detroit. And you know this is just one, one example. I think, of a situation in which really the, the public did not understand what was going on behind the scenes, what was justifying these decisions and what were the kind of reasons why this was actually happening.

IB: Yeah, so I'm, I'm fairly familiar with the Flint water crisis, having lived in and around Flint most of my life, but I did, I didn't know about the connection with the, with the Detroit water crisis as well, that's very interesting. So thank you for sharing an overview of this historical context of the racial inequities that we see in water access in Michigan today. This history is so important to understand. We will end our episode here for today and pick up in our next episode to talk more about how these legacies of injustice affect public health and what role individuals in public health play in combating these health inequities that are tied to water access and water affordability. Funding for this podcast is provided by the Health Resources and Services Administration. To our listeners, thank you for tuning in. We encourage you to check out some of the resources listed in the podcast notes and to stay tuned for part two. Until then, stay safe and stay curious everyone.