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Health Advocacy Groups Meet with PA DOH and DEP to Discuss Community and Physician Interaction, Setbacks, Water Provisions for Affected Residents, and Tour of Communities Impacted by Shale Gas Development

October 1, 2021— On September 21, public health advocacy groups **Physicians for Social Responsibility Pennsylvania** (PSR PA) and the **SWPA Environmental Health Project** (EHP) met for a fifth time with the **Pennsylvania Department of Health** (DOH) to press the agency to consider a number of actions that would lower the risk of health impacts to residents from shale gas development emissions. **Secretary Alison Beam** and seven other DOH representatives attended the virtual meeting. The **Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection** (DEP), including **Deputy Secretary of the Office of Oil and Gas Management Scott Perry**, also attended.

The health advocacy groups discussed how the DOH could interact more directly with physicians and communities to educate them on the risks of living in proximity to shale gas development, including the possibility of using materials the groups provided. The DOH reported that it is working with the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) to develop physician guidance, and they are exploring the creation of a physician fact sheet regarding health outcomes from shale gas emissions.

“It’s a really important step to help healthcare providers recognize what is potentially at play in their patients’ health—where to get information and help,” said **Dr. Ned Ketyer**, a pediatrician, president of the board of PSR PA, and consultant to EHP. “We’re glad it’s moving forward. Health providers really do need that guidance.”

“We’re incredibly grateful that DOH is open to sharing community education resources from organizations such as EHP, which are more focused and knowledgeable on the topic than DOH is,” said EHP Executive Director **Alison L. Steele**. “Since EHP’s mission is to defend public health, and all of our materials are fact-based, DOH should have no concerns about making existing resources widely available, thereby protecting the health of concerned Pennsylvania residents who have repeatedly asked for help.”

The health advocacy groups questioned how DOH and DEP collaborate with each other on health complaints from residents about shale gas-related issues. **Deputy Secretary Perry** discussed a formal policy whereby DEP refers anyone with a health concern to DOH, which then reaches out to the resident and tries to get them into its health registry. DOH may also refer them to physicians, analyze lab results, or recommend additional testing.

Deputy Secretary Perry also expressed doubt that setback distances between occupied buildings and shale gas facilities would help protect residents’ health, and anyway the DEP does not have the authority to change current setback rules. The health groups pushed back on this notion, noting that shale gas development is inherently dangerous to human health and is certainly dangerous to the environment, and that it would be helpful if DEP and DOH advocated for greater setbacks.

“It is of the utmost importance that the Department of Health is able to provide official input to all permits proposed to the Department of Environmental Protection and other policy decisions that impact human health,” said **Tammy Murphy**, Advocacy Director of Physicians for Social Responsibility Pennsylvania.

The advocacy groups asked the agencies to talk about whether they have a more permanent solution, other than water buffalos and bottled water, for residents whose water supply has been deemed undrinkable. They pressed DEP about the possibility of increasing permitting costs to cover funding deficits. **Deputy Secretary Perry** said that temporary solutions to water issues are instituted in the short term and that, if the agency makes a positive determination, it will order permanent restoration of a resident’s water supply, although he noted a lack of funding based on a permit structure (one-time permitting fee) that cannot sustain the work his office does.

“It is vital that the DEP and the DOH consider additional resources or options for residents with contaminated water supplies, assuring them a permanent solution,” said **Makenzie White**, EHP’s Public Health Manager. “Since polluted water is associated with a multitude of health concerns, all residents deserve to have access to clean and potable water not just temporarily but permanently.”

On July 27, four DOH representative, including **Secretary Beam**, completed a tour of communities and people impacted by shale gas development in southwestern Pennsylvania, learning first-hand how the industry has harmed health and changed the lives of families forever. The September 21 meeting gave all tour participants a chance to reflect on that day. The DOH was appreciative for the opportunity to visit so many affected individuals in frontline communities and hear their stories and perspectives about the harm they have experienced.

“We value the time Secretary Beam and her team gave while visiting impacted residents,” said **Stacey Magda**, Community Organizer, Mountain Watershed Association, who was on the tour with DOH. “We know that the tour was impactful, often emotional, and displayed an important gesture of presence that the community both needs and deserves to have. Our hope is that the DOH will recognize how widespread the issues are and make time for future tours throughout Pennsylvania that address each stage of the shale gas industry from wells to transport routes to landfill facilities that accept the dangerous, hazardous waste.”

Physicians for Social Responsibility Pennsylvania and the Southwest Pennsylvania Environmental Health Project, along with their partners at the Center for Coalfield Justice and Mountain Watershed Association, are committed to continuing to engage with the Pennsylvania DOH and DEP in hopes that these agencies will hear the concerns of the community.

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