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Health Advocacy Groups Say Pennsylvania Department Of Health Not Actively Protecting Pennsylvanians Living Near Shale Gas Development
While residents continue to fear for their health, DOH is taking a hands-off approach

McMURRAY, PA, July 8, 2020 — The Pennsylvania Department of Health (DOH) was the subject of critical findings in “Report 1 of the Forty-Third Statewide Investigating Grand Jury,” released by Attorney General Josh Shapiro’s office on June 25, addressing the shale gas industry in southwestern Pennsylvania. In a response included within that report, the DOH defended itself as having taken the necessary steps to correct past missteps and begin protecting the health of Pennsylvania residents living in proximity to shale gas development.

In a subsequent virtual meeting, however, on June 26, between **DOH Secretary Dr. Rachel Levine and DOH staff members** and two public health advocacy organizations – **Physicians for Social Responsibility-Pennsylvania (PSR-PA)** and the **Southwest Pennsylvania Environmental Health Project (EHP)** – raised the same question of passivity in the face of serious health consequences brought on by the shale gas industry.

“The attorney general’s report called out the Department of Health for taking a passive stance on the public health threats the shale gas industry presents,” said **Tammy Murphy**, Advocacy Director for PSR PA, who attended the virtual meeting. “The organizations on the ground must move the needle forward in actively protecting the health of Pennsylvanians despite the path that the DOH has chosen, which is to continue to take a hands-off, wait-and-see approach to address a growing cancer crisis in addition to other health impacts happening to the communities in the shadow of the unconventional gas development industry.”

Central to the conversation were [two studies](#) the DOH commissioned last year to examine the health effects of shale gas development – one a study of whether there is a correlation between the shale gas industry and the risk of [rare childhood cancers in southwestern Pennsylvania](#), and one a study of other potential health impacts from the shale gas industry. The DOH has partnered with an as-yet unnamed academic institution to perform the studies, which could take up to three years or more to complete.

The health advocacy organizations had previously urged the DOH to establish an [Investigations Process Overview Panel](#) for stakeholders that would ensure transparency throughout the investigations, eliminate conflicts of interest, and involve the participation of affected residents. The organizations had also requested that DOH involve other research experts in the design of the study and recommended that the study should include the radioactive waste stream as an exposure pathway.

In the meeting with PSR PA and EHP, however, the DOH said it had established the scope and was not inviting any input into the design of the studies, instead deferring all decisions to its academic partner. Meanwhile, the DOH would not comment on what level of study results would prompt it to take any action to protect the public. The DOH also said that it would not institute any health-protective measures until the studies were completed.

“More than [two dozen epidemiological studies](#) already show that shale gas development raises the risk of health issues, many of them life-threatening, for people living nearby,” said **Sarah Rankin**, Public Health Nurse for EHP, who attended the virtual meeting with the DOH. “Even without the new studies, the DOH should be actively engaged now in helping people and communities respond to the threats they are already under.”

Rankin notes that these well-designed studies show higher odds of health outcomes like asthma exacerbations, high-risk pregnancies, and congenital heart defects in areas of shale gas development when compared to areas without it. Short-term exposure to shale gas pollution can cause irritation of the eyes and respiratory tract, headaches, dizziness, fatigue, skin reactions, nausea, and memory impairment – complaints she hears directly from impacted residents. More than 50 pollutants present in shale gas development, including formaldehyde, benzene, and radium, are known human carcinogens.

Also at issue are DOH claims that they have adequately reached out to communities and have made access to the [DOH Registry](#) for oil and gas related health complaints widely known. When asked at the virtual meeting what was being done with the health symptoms reported, Dr. Levine said they are just added into the database. She said this information *could* be used for prospective studies if the number of calls could result in statistically significant findings, but no other action is to be taken on them now. The DOH maintained there was nothing more they could do if people did not report health symptoms at the level of hundreds of calls per symptom, this despite the sparse populations in rural shale communities.

“The announcement of this three-year study, which once brought the local community hope, now feels like a three-year postponement of any meaningful action,” said **Laura Dagley**, Assistant Advocacy Director for PSR-PA and a registered nurse, who was also part of the virtual meeting. “Waiting to take action to protect communities is dismissive of the [body of existing research](#) on health impacts from fracking, which already links poor health outcomes for those who live near fracking sites. People are beginning to lose confidence that the DOH really cares about their health and their families.”

Further complicating matters, no discernable coordination exists between the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the DOH. When a resident makes a complaint to the DEP, they must also make a separate complaint to the DOH. Yet, residents with health impacts who initially call the DEP are not explicitly directed to call the DOH.

“Without any promise of actual protection or guidance, the burden continues to be on the impacted communities to advocate for themselves,” said **Heaven Sensky**, Community Organizer for Center for Coalfield Justice. “The DOH must hear what impacted people have to say, it must update communities on the process of the research studies, and, most importantly, it must let people know how they can protect themselves and their families from the harm being done to them.”

Despite the disappointing meeting with the DOH, Physicians for Social Responsibility-Pennsylvania and the Southwest Pennsylvania Environmental Health Project are committed to continuing to engage with the DOH in hopes that the agency will hear the concerns of the community.

“We intend to continue to have these difficult discussions with DOH representatives in order to hold the DOH accountable for its failure to act and meet the needs of people whose health is suffering, and to urge them to be proactive in protecting the health of all Pennsylvanians,” said Tammy Murphy.

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