



Duckworth: EPA must explain apparent efforts to silence career children's health official

October 23 2018 12:34 PM

CHICAGO – More than a year after the Trump Administration held a “lead summit” and created a task force focused on developing a strategy to address our nation’s lead crisis and [amid reports](#) that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) may have sidelined a renowned children’s health official at taxpayer expense in order to delay or prevent the release of a major lead poisoning report, U.S. Senator Tammy Duckworth today wrote to EPA Acting Administrator Andrew Wheeler demanding an explanation for the agency’s odd personnel decision and an update on the report’s timeline.

“Reducing lead exposure and protecting families is a major priority for me and my constituents,” wrote Duckworth to Acting Administrator Wheeler. **“The Administration is long overdue in upholding its promise to address this crisis. A critical step in the right direction would be to release the lead strategy for public comment and peer-review without further delay... You must also provide transparency as to why EPA pushed out a renowned leader in children’s environmental health. This highly-respected pediatrician and epidemiologist is exactly the type of non-partisan career official that Americans deserve on the job working to protect their public health.”**

Earlier today, the EPA issued a news release with the headline “Trump Administration Marks National Lead Poisoning Prevention Week” claiming to highlight the Administration’s work to reduce lead exposure and raise “awareness about the health risks associated with exposure to lead, specifically for children.” The news release did not include the long-delayed federal lead strategy but in fact appeared to announce another delay in its’ release, merely saying that EPA and others are “working through the interagency process to finalize the forthcoming” report.

[Senator Duckworth’s letter is available below:](#)

The Honorable Andrew Wheeler
Acting Administrator
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue N.W.
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Acting Administrator Wheeler:

As we begin observing National Lead Poisoning Prevention Week and following troubling reports that the Director of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Office of Children's Health, a non-political career official, was abruptly put on paid administrative leave with little explanation, I write to reiterate my request that EPA release the Administration's lead strategy for public comment and peer-review.

As Acting Administrator, you must also provide transparency as to why EPA pushed out a renowned leader in children's environmental health. This highly-respected pediatrician and epidemiologist is exactly the type of non-partisan career official that Americans deserve on the job working to protect their public health. Failure to provide a detailed and credible explanation lends credence to reasonable suspicions that your personnel action was designed to undermine the mission of EPA's Office of Children's Health Protection.

Public health experts at EPA, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the American Association of Pediatrics and many others have found that there is no safe level of lead exposure. For vulnerable populations like young children, pregnant mothers and the elderly, exposure to lead can be extremely dangerous and permanently life altering.

Any successful strategy to eliminate lead exposure must include a systematic approach to identifying the presence of lead-service-lines (LSL), a plan to prioritize replacement of LSLs in areas with vulnerable populations like schools and daycares, and an urgently needed comprehensive modernization of the outdated and ineffective Lead and Copper Rule. It must also include a request for the financial resources necessary to ensure that the lead exposure crisis that persists in both rural and urban areas will be tackled once and for all.

The Administration held a "lead summit" and created a task force focused on developing a strategy to address this crisis. More than a year later, we have not yet received an update from the Administration on its efforts to address this urgent public health crisis. In fact, the only meaningful action EPA appears to have taken is forcing the Children's Health Director, who should be part of the Agency's efforts to reduce lead exposure and implement a lead strategy, to indefinitely leave work while receiving

full pay and benefits. To better understand the status of EPA's effort to address the national lead poisoning crisis, please provide detailed responses to the following:

Provide a detailed timeline of when the Administration plans to release its long-delayed lead strategy plan;

Explain your decision to abruptly place a key, highly experienced career official on administrative leave, even though that highly respected individual leads the team that should be implementing a strategy to protect families from lead and other environmental threats to their health;

Explain how this personnel action was not an attempt at intimidating or punishing a career civil servant by cleverly using an administratively authorized absence to humiliate a Federal employee;

Clarify whether this personnel action was intended to be a disciplinary action and if this was intended to be a disciplinary action, explain why EPA chose to use Administrative Leave rather than an adverse personnel action in response to an alleged prohibited personnel practice; and

If it is determined that the personnel action was actually an attempt to retaliate or otherwise harm the civil servant, please describe what specific actions you will take to restore confidence in career EPA personnel that they will be protected from arbitrary and capricious personnel actions by political appointees.

Reducing lead exposure and protecting families is a major priority for me and my constituents. The Administration is long overdue in upholding its promise to address this crisis. A critical step in the right direction would be to release the lead strategy for public comment and peer-review without further delay. Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,