

# MWRA AND THE PUBLIC HEALTH COMMUNITY PARTNERS FOR DRINKING WATER

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**S**upplier of water for 2.2 million customers in Greater Boston, Massachusetts Water Resources Authority believes that partnership between public health professionals and water suppliers is crucial to meeting customers' expectations for water of the highest quality at affordable cost.

## **Public health is truly the "bottom line" for water supply.**

Today customers *want* and *need* to know how the safety of everyday products is measured and protected – especially with something like water which everyone uses daily. The public health community plays a critical role in addressing these customer expectations and needs. To effectively play that role, the public health community must be involved in all aspects of supplying and protecting drinking water and with every related health issue – including innovative research and timely health surveillance.

In Greater Boston, MWRA and the public health community have nurtured long-valued partnerships and have created important new ones in pursuit of these aims. All of these activities are tied to MWRA's overall programs to improve and protect drinking water quality in cost-effective methods directly related to gaining the greatest public health benefit.



## **Public Health Advisory Group**

MWRA's water supply program reflects extensive consultation with the public health community through the Public Health Advisory Group. The Advisory Group and its members regularly consult with MWRA on how the highest level of public health benefits can be furthered by the water supply system. Members of the Advisory Group include:

- Massachusetts Association of Health Boards
- Massachusetts Public Health Association
- Massachusetts Health Officers Association
- Massachusetts League of Community Health Centers
- Public Health Nurses Association
- Water Supply Citizens Advisory Committee
- Representatives from Local Health Boards & Local Water Departments
- AIDS Action

## **Coordination with Public Health Officials and Water Superintendents**

Local health officers and water superintendents from MWRA's service area communities play a crucial role in MWRA's Integrated Water Supply Improvement

Program MWRA helps to keep these representatives informed through efforts including the Public Health Advisory Group listed above and several communication efforts that provide updates on water quality. MWRA performs many thousands of water quality samples per month, including testing for many of its member communities, to determine compliance with the Safe Drinking Water Act of 1996. The results of these tests are published weekly in a comprehensive operations report, and then provided to all water and health departments and elected officials within the service area in the monthly Water Quality Update. MWRA also works closely with all 40 local boards of health and promotes interaction between the health and water departments in all communities.

## **Cooperative Research/Surveillance Projects**

MWRA's water quality testing program continues to promote new and more accurate ways to monitor levels of microbial pathogens, disinfection by-products, and other potential contaminants in the water supply. Long running partnerships with Massachusetts Department of Public Health, the Boston Public Health Commission, and local universities have pro-

noted the recent start of a research/surveillance project, funded in part by MWRA, that tracks health outcomes inside and outside of the MWRA system. This project works to improve the understanding of environmental health risks and the relationship between public health and water quality. Also included in this project are efforts to implement an effective early warning system for possible waterborne disease outbreaks.

On both the national and local levels, there are still critical research needs and information gaps on health risks and the effectiveness of water treatment technologies. The need and nature of treatment for MWRA water will be continually reevaluated as additional data is collected from both MWRA collaborative research and other national studies become available.

### Annual Water Quality Report

Many people have questions about the water they drink. To help answer the questions consumers might have about their water source, water quality test results, and information on health effects of contaminants found in their drinking water, MWRA issues an annual water quality report, or consumer confidence report, each July. Public health officials are vital to the drafting of the report through consultation on how to best relate the state of the water supplied by MWRA.

### Lead Exposure Education Efforts

Educating consumers about the risks involved with lead exposure is another priority in promoting public health. These education efforts highlight the many exposures to lead that exist in the environment, including lead-based paint, the leading cause of lead poisoning. Lead in tap water is a lesser exposure but can increase a person's lead exposure up to 20%. This is of particular concern for infants drinking baby formula or concentrated juices.

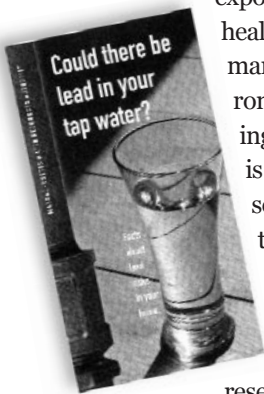
Even though the water provided by MWRA is virtually lead-free when it leaves the reservoirs, lead can get into tap water through home service piping, lead solder used in plumbing, and some brass fixtures. Although most homes in the MWRA service area have very low levels of lead, some homes may have lead levels in their tap water above the EPA Action Level of 15 parts per billion (ppb).

In order to get the word out about the potential of lead in tap water, MWRA has initiated several education efforts including the following.

- A page of the Annual Water Quality Report was used to display lead test results, demonstrate simple steps to reduce potential lead exposure, and provide con-

### MWRA's 1999 Annual Report Highlights

- MWRA's watershed protection program continues to provide an effective first line of defense against potentially harmful contaminants.
- Aggressive repair/replacement program for aging pipelines is underway in community and MWRA systems.
- Lead levels at the tap have continued to drop throughout the MWRA service area due to corrosion control program started in 1996.
- MWRA has a 10 year, \$1.7 billion Integrated Water Supply Improvement Program with projects from source to tap (see program map).
- Test results for 120 other contaminants found only 13 and all passed the standards set by federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).
- With an estimated 1700 tests per month looking for bacteria, no MWRA served community violated the EPA standards.
- Emphasis that no water, tap or bottled, is absolutely germ-free, and therefore those with weakened immune systems (for example chemotherapy patient and people with HIV/AIDS) should talk with their doctors about possible special precautions.



tacts for further information.

- Located on the MWRA web page are several pages with information on lead and tap water. Also on the web page is a list of labs for those consumers who want to test their tap water for possible lead. To visit these pages, please visit [www.mwra.com](http://www.mwra.com).
- A new easier-to-understand lead education brochure was recently completed and now over 30 of our communities include this brochure in their annual water bills.

**Massachusetts Water Resources Authority  
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The Massachusetts Legislature created MWRA in 1984 to manage water and sewer services for 2.5 million people and 5,500 businesses in 61 communities in metropolitan Boston. While the Boston Harbor Project is the best known of its projects, MWRA also maintains 400 miles of water pipes, aqueducts and tunnels and 240 miles of sewers. Also underway are projects to control combined sewer overflows, provide adequate water delivery and meet all federal, state and local water and sewer standards.

MWRA offers a wide variety of informational materials on the region's water and sewer systems and the natural environment.

To find out what's available, contact MWRA Public Affairs Department at **617-788-1170** or visit our web site:

**[www.mwra.com](http://www.mwra.com)**

*"Drink with confidence, flush with pride"*