Flint’s Drinking Water Crisis and the Urgency to Reimagine Experts’ Relationship with the Public

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THURSDAY, OCT. 20, 2016 @ 4:30 PM

WEINSTEIN AUDITORIUM, WRIGHT HALL

The Flint, MI lead-in-water crisis that caused large-scale health harm reveals disturbing similarities with the Washington, DC lead-in-water crisis of 2001-2004, which was associated with a spike in fetal deaths and elevated blood lead levels in children. In both cities, experts in positions of power knew of a serious problem with lead in the water but took active steps to keep it under wraps. In both cities, affected residents were the first to discover the contamination but were routinely dismissed. This talk makes the case that neither Flint nor DC are outliers, and that the causes of contamination are not only science- and policy-related but also cultural. It proposes that technical fixes offer only a partial solution to the problem of lead in US drinking water. Equally important is a cultural shift that equips experts in all sectors – government, industry, and academia – to recognize the technical and moral relevance of the voices of the publics they serve.