March 2nd, 2016

The Honorable Paul R. LePage
Governor, State of Maine
Office of the Governor
1 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333

Re: Access to Safe Drinking Water Needed for All Maine Families

Dear Governor LePage,

The tragic story of Flint, Michigan demonstrates the perils of government inaction in the face of childhood exposure to toxic chemicals in drinking water. Tens of thousands of children could have avoided harmful exposure to lead had Michigan’s public health officials intervened earlier. Unfortunately, Maine faces our own Flint-like drinking water crisis – dangerous levels of arsenic in household wells.

Both lead in Flint and arsenic in Maine represent a silent epidemic that harms the developing brain of children, threatening their ability to learn and become successful members of society. An estimated one in eight drinking water wells contains arsenic above the federal safety standard, leaving 150,000 Maine people with unsafe water to drink. Yet only 45% of residents have tested their wells for arsenic, far below the official state goal.

In both Flint and Maine, the burden of harm falls disproportionately on lower income families. The majority of rural residents in Maine are on well water. And most of Maine’s rural counties are economically distressed, with childhood poverty exceeding 20%. The cost of treatment of unsafe water can easily exceed a family’s ability to pay.

Last year, Maine missed two major opportunities to help protect our families. First, the veto of last year’s LD 1181 prevented the Maine Center for Disease Control (CDC) from receiving a new steady revenue stream for outreach programs to boost the state’s testing rate. Then, Maine DHHS rejected federal funds to sustain current outreach and education programs, setting us up for failure to meet the state’s benchmark of testing at least 65% of drinking water wells for arsenic by the year 2020.

The tragedy in Flint should be a wake-up call to Maine to start protecting our citizens from toxic chemicals in our own drinking water. We ask you to direct Maine’s Department of Health and Human Services to announce a plan for robust action to reduce the number of Maine families exposed to unsafe levels of arsenic in their drinking water, including:

• A detailed plan for outreach and education to boost the rate of well water testing;
• State resources dedicated to support outreach, testing, and treatment; and
• A timeline with benchmarks for meaningful progress.
We hope that you agree with us that all Maine families should have affordable access to safe drinking water. We stand ready to collaborate with you in developing a serious plan of action. Please respond to Emma Halas O’Connor, Environmental Health Strategy Center, at ehalasoc@preventharm.org or (207) 699-5799, to work with us to protect the health of Maine children from arsenic in our drinking water.

Sincerely,

Michael Belliveau, Executive Director
Environmental Health Strategy Center

Tina Pettingill, Executive Director
Maine Public Health Association

Janice Pelletier, Board President
American Academy of Pediatrics
ME Chapter

Claire Berkowitz, Executive Director
Maine Children’s Alliance

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Tracy Gregoire, State Director
Learning Disabilities Association of Maine

Karen D’Andrea, Executive Director
Physicians for Social Responsibility ME Chapter

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Maine Children’s Alliance

Physicians for Social Responsibility
Maine Chapter