

THE Skanner

Challenging People to Shape
a Better Future Now

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Opinion

A Full Court Press to Get the Lead Out

There’s nothing quite like seeing a kid who was born healthy but now suffers cognitive impairment and is prone to outbursts of anger. As a volunteer restoring six-story walk-ups in Harlem in the early 90s, I saw how lead paint chips and dust were wreaking havoc on the kids in those low-income buildings.

The kids not only lived in a cloud of despair but in a cloud of lead-infused dust. The former made achieving their dreams difficult. The latter made it impossible. Fast forward a few decades and the threat of lead poisoning has continued to manifest in public health crises. It was at the heart of the well-publicized water crisis in Flint, Michigan that started in 2014 ... and the subsequent not-as-well-publicized water crises in Benton Harbor, MI and Pittsburgh, PA just a few short years later.

Now, thanks to community organizers, advocacy groups, the federal government, and even some private companies, we’re seeing a major push to eliminate the lingering threat of lead. It is thanks to the hard work of activists like Gabriel Gray. Gray is an organizer with Pittsburgh United, a local advocacy group that works on clean water and housing issues. She came to this work during her own city’s water crisis.

Only finding out about the crisis once there was a run on bottled water in all the local stores, Gray applied with the Pittsburgh Water and Sewage Authority (PWSA) for a lead line replacement for her home and was denied. Then



Ben Jealous
Guest Columnist

she started organizing with her neighbors. “Because of the work the Pittsburgh United Our Water Campaign did to hold PWSA accountable, it is now the only public water authority in Pennsylvania to be governed by the state’s Public Utility Commission (PUC).

“We’re seeing a major push to eliminate the lingering threat of lead

However, my neighborhood borders an area with a different water authority not governed by the PUC – the Wilkesburg-Penn Joint Water Authority. We’re now working with Wilkesburg-Penn to stress the importance of equity in its lead line replacement plans, after finding that environmental justice communities had been slower to receive replacements than other communities in that authority’s jurisdiction.” The increased focus on stopping lead poisoning is also thanks to tireless advocates like my friend Ruth Ann Norton, who heads the Green & Healthy Homes Initiative (GHHI) in Baltimore.

GHHI was recently chosen

to administer \$50 million in grants across the mid-Atlantic under the EPA’s Environmental Justice Thriving Communities Grantmaking program created by the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA). Norton says, “We can make homes, schools, childcare centers lead-free, as long as we have a comprehensive approach and flexible funding. And we can do this simultaneously as we address climate work, with some of the same funding. It’s an opportunity we need to seize if we’re going to end lead’s toxic legacy.”

There are additional rays of hope thanks to healthcare providers like GHHI partner Penn Medicine’s Lancaster General Health. The Hospital put \$50 million into a community health improvement initiative to eliminate childhood lead poisoning in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. With a “goal of identifying and remediating lead hazards in at least 2,800 Lancaster County homes,” LG Health is setting an example for the private sector. And the Biden-Harris administration’s focus on environmental justice and access to clean and safe water is aiding the national effort.

The IRA and bipartisan infrastructure law offer a treasure trove of federal funding to clean up this mess. There are billions of dollars already flowing to states to improve water infrastructure and make drinking water safer. And billions more in environmental justice and energy efficiency investments that can be put towards lead abatement as well. Ruth Ann Norton described how states

could apply for Climate Pollution Reduction Grants – a \$5 billion program in the IRA – to take a “whole house approach” that makes lead abatement and other key remediations part of a comprehensive approach to building maintenance and electrification. Lead is a global problem.

A recent study by Lancet Planetary Health estimated “5.5 million adults worldwide died in 2019 from cardiovascular disease attributable to lead exposure – a toll more than six times higher than a previous estimate.”

That year, the combined price tag of the loss in IQ in children under 5 years old and cardiovascular mortality was an estimated \$6 trillion. There is no cure for lead poisoning other than prevention. The investment in future health makes good economic sense for lawmakers, government agencies, and companies alike. Most urgently, states and municipalities need to take advantage of the funds available through IRA and the bipartisan infrastructure law.

And they need to work with community organizations like GHHI and Pittsburgh United, as well as private companies where appropriate, to make sure the funds are administered correctly and equitably. If there was ever a worthy cause for an “all hands on deck” approach, wouldn’t protecting our kids and their futures be it?

Ben Jealous is the Executive Director of the Sierra Club and a Professor of Practice at the University of Pennsylvania.

Congress Can Only Take Away Your TikTok If You Let Them

On March 13, the US House of Representatives passed HR 7521, the “Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act.” The bill, which would attempt to ban the social media app TikTok unless its Chinese owners, ByteDance, sell it to non-Chinese owners, faces an uncertain future in the Senate, but president Joe Biden says he’ll sign it if it passes.

I don’t find the prospect of an attempt to ban TikTok unsettling, precisely because of the word “attempt.”

At present, only about 170 million Americans use TikTok. If this bill passes, that number is likely to go up, not down – and it’s likely to do so in ways that educate an entire new generation of Americans on how to find ways around the orders of their would-be masters in Washington.

There’s nothing new about

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that. Older Americans remember learning how to copy software, share music, encrypt files (and, later, currency), obtain marijuana, etc. when previous generations

“Their feigned concern for your privacy notably doesn’t extend to ‘protecting’ you from surveillance by any or all of their own

of politicians got the silly idea that they were in charge and could order us around.

None of that, however, exonerates the 352 Republican and Democratic members of Congress who voted for this

idiotic, and patently unconstitutional, and irrefutably un-American, bill.

Under the guise of “protecting” Americans from the People’s Republic of China – one of the rotating cast members in a perpetual Enemy of the Week scam – those evil-doers unmasked themselves, most of them not for the first time, as clones of that country’s Communist Party apparatus.

Their “national security concerns” are risible, and their feigned concern for your privacy notably doesn’t extend to “protecting” you from surveillance by any or all of their own “alphabet

soup” law enforcement and intelligence agencies.

The proposed TikTok ban isn’t about “national security,” nor is it about your privacy.

It’s about cultivating short-term moral panic for their political benefit.

It’s about establishing their longer-term control over anything and everything you might choose to do.

And it won’t take long to learn which American Big Tech lobbyists and campaign contributors it was ALWAYS about giving an economic gift to.

The best way to respond to this attack on your rights is to install TikTok on your devices, start educating yourself on how to keep it there (or, if necessary, reinstall it) if the bill becomes law, and spread the word.

You can find the roll call vote on the bill here: <https://clerk.house.gov/Votes/202486>.