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- GraceMed offering health screenings for residents above groundwater contamination

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- The health center is seeking funds to provide the screenings for free, but is currently asking residents to provide insurance information.

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GraceMed, a nonprofit community clinic, is offering health screenings to residents impacted by groundwater contamination northeast of downtown Wichita.

The community health center is seeking funds to provide the screenings at no cost to patients, said chief medical officer Julie Elder. GraceMed is currently asking residents to provide insurance information.

“We’ve raised some funds, and we’re working to raise more,” Elder said. “We don’t want costs to be a barrier for anyone.”

The groundwater contamination comes from a Union Pacific rail yard at 29th and Grove and runs about 3 miles south to Murdock. Exposure to trichloroethylene (TCE), the chemical in the water, can cause kidney cancer and possibly increase the risk of non-Hodgkin lymphoma and liver cancer, according to the [National Cancer Institute](#).

GraceMed will meet with residents to discuss their exposure to the chemical. It will also do blood work to seek signs of diseases affiliated with trichloroethene.

“Our goal is to offer baseline testing,” Elder said. “We’re looking at basic lab work. ... Things like renal cancer or liver cancer, those are the things we’re trying to detect in blood work.”

This spring, the state produced a [health study](#) that found increased rates of liver cancer and low birth weights among people living above the contaminated groundwater. State officials said the study cannot determine whether TCE exposure caused those health disparities.

In a May meeting about the study, the Kansas Department of Health and Environment [encouraged](#) those worried about the contamination’s health impact to speak with their health care provider. Several residents asked whether if the state or other entities like Union Pacific would contribute to paying for any costs of the health care. KDHE Secretary Janet Stanek did not give an answer.

“We hear your request, and I would say we’re working in partnership with city, county, state government and UP – the railroad,” Stanek said in the May meeting. “And all of this is taken under consideration and will be (part of) future discussions.”

The contamination came to light for many residents [last fall](#), when the state and Union Pacific were preparing a final clean-up plan for the site. But the city of Wichita first discovered the spill in 1994 and alerted KDHE soon after.

Drinking or swimming in contaminated well water is considered a health risk, [according to the KDHE](#). The contamination does not impact city water, which is safe to drink.

“Ultimately the goal is to help replace some of the fear that’s out there about risks and potential exposure with some numbers and maybe a little bit of hope mixed in,” Elder said.

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“Everyone’s potential exposure is gonna be different too. Some people have lived in that area for years and years and years and years. Maybe they had a well that was contaminated. Maybe they were there momentarily or for a very short time. It just varies individual to individual. That’s an important piece of the puzzle to try to assess risk individually.