

Bringing clean water—and hope—to Western Pa.

By Marlon Ferguson

When I make the drive from Penn Hills to my mother's house in Aliquippa, I am greeted by a long flight of stairs and a daunting task—carrying pallets of bottled water to her kitchen on the second floor.

Like many people in my hometown, my mother, my siblings, and my extended family won't use the water to cook, much less drink. They know the water is delivered through crumbling lead pipes, and is not safe to have in their bodies.

My family's experience is not unusual in this corner of the Commonwealth. Western Pennsylvania communities have long struggled with lead in their drinking water, including one Pittsburgh elementary school [where lead levels were 61 times higher than federal standards](#). Indeed some of the first [research revealing lead's dangers to children was pioneered](#) by a University of Pittsburgh professor—and native Philadelphian—Herb Needleham.

Even with these longstanding problems and well-known dangers, it has taken decades to start making real progress to remove lead from drinking water. But major steps are taking place, including this month, when the Environmental Protection Agency issued new rules [requiring water systems to replace lead pipes and conduct more rigorous water testing](#).

The bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, signed into law in 2021, also boosted the effort. The law commits \$50 billion to improving water infrastructure, which the White House has said is [the largest investment in water in our nation's history](#).

Of course, investing in clean water infrastructure is hard to see (the results are literally buried), but the benefits are coming to a faucet near you. Nearly [\\$30 million has been directed to lead pipe replacement around Pittsburgh](#) alone. That funding will help Pittsburgh Water & Sewer Authority replace 200 public and 167 private lead service lines; West View Water Authority to

replace 750 lead service lines; and the Wilkesburg-Penn Joint Water Authority replace 1,005 existing lead service lines. In my hometown of Aliquippa, [more than \\$3.1 million from the law](#) is helping replace 275 lead service lines with copper alternatives.

Such progress does not come easily. Donald Trump's [frequent boasts that "infrastructure week" was coming](#) became a running joke in Washington, but never brought money back to western Pennsylvania. By contrast, [Vice President Harris recalled](#) while visiting Pittsburgh how she and President Biden decided to address the lead problem, noting that "Americans in up to 10 million homes and children in thousands of schools and childcare facilities had to drink water coming out of lead pipes." By bringing Republicans and Democrats together to pass bipartisan legislation, the administration made real progress.

That result is that Pennsylvania communities are getting badly needed funds to bring water infrastructure into the 21st Century, creating good jobs in the process. One example: Independent Enterprises, a Pittsburgh construction company, [hired 100 people for lead pipe replacement work](#).

These investments will continue the economic gains of recent years. Every county in the Pittsburgh metro area today has [lower unemployment rates than at any point in 2020](#). Black Americans have [the lowest unemployment rates in U.S. history](#). And Harris made clear [last month at the Economic Club of Pittsburgh](#) this progress would continue if she reaches the White House.

I have lived in and around Pittsburgh my whole life. I saw firsthand the painful closure of steel mills in Beaver County. The road down was steep and the road back has been long.

But knowing my neighbors are starting to do things as basic as drinking water from their kitchen sinks and brushing their teeth without bottled water feels like progress. It may be hard to see. It may be hard to believe. But as the Book of Psalms says, "for with you is the fountain of life, in your

light we see light.” And in that clean water, I see light—and hope—that is worth building on at the ballot box this fall.

If nothing else, I hope it soon saves my knees a trip up my mother’s stairs.

Marlon Ferguson is a lifelong resident of western Pennsylvania. He played basketball at Pitt, served in the Navy, and has led multiple community organizations. He lives in Pittsburgh with his partner and their two dogs.