



Crestwood officials cut corners and supplied residents with tainted water for 2 decades

# POISON

## IN THE WELL

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STAFF REPORTER

**L**ike every town across the nation, south suburban Crestwood tucks a notice into utility bills each summer reassuring residents their drinking water is safe. Village leaders also trumpet the claim in their monthly newsletter, while boasting they offer the cheapest water rates in Cook County. But those pronouncements hide a trou-

bling reality: For more than two decades, the 11,000 or so residents in this working class community unknowingly drank tap water contaminated with toxic chemicals linked to cancer and other health problems, a Newsspaper investigation found. As village officials were building a national reputation for pinching pennies, and sending out fliers proclaiming Crestwood.



Village well tested positive for polution

As early as 1988, water and soil test found cancer-causing chemicals in and around a community well in south suburban Crestwood.

SOURCE: ESRI, TeleAtlas



Officials kept using the well even though state environmental officials told them at least 22 years ago that dangerous chemicals related to a dry-cleaning solvent had oozed into the water, records show.

The village avoided scrutiny by telling state regulators in 1986 that they would get all of their tap water from Lake Michigan, and would use the well only in an emergency. But records show Crestwood kept drawing well water on a routine basis—relying on it for up to 20 percent of the village’s water supply some months.

The well wasn’t shut off for good until December 2007, after the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency tested the water for the first time in more than 20 years.

‘YOU WOULD EXPECT THEM TO TELL THEIR CONSTITUENTS WHAT’S IN THE WATER THEY’RE DRINKING.’

—Senate President John Cullerton

Crestwood’s well, just across a narrow, tree-lined creek that drains into the nearby Cal- Sag Channel. The well water is polluted with two chemicals related to perchloroethylene, or PCE, a dry-cleaning solvent linked to cancer, liver damage and neurological problems.

Thousands of other sites are contaminated with the same chemicals, usually from illegal dumping or improper disposal. But there are



This structure in Crestwood houses the now-capped community well contaminated with cancer-causing chemicals.

few if any other documented cases when public officials knew about the problem and looked the other way. Crestwood’s actions began to come to light after a mother refused to stop asking questions about why her teenage son suffered leukemia as a toddler. One of her numerous public-records requests turned up a report outlining some of what the EPA knew about the contaminated well, and she prodded state investigators to dig deeper into the case. The Newspaper discovered more details through interviews and public-records requests. “I’m so sad and angry and disappointed about this,” said Tricia Krause, who moved to Crestwood in 1987 and gave birth to three children while living there for nearly nine years. “There is no excuse for what they did to all of us.” It is unknown if the water contributed to any health problems in Crestwood, including the cancer diagnosed in Krause’s son, Matthew, now 19 and healthy. State officials haven’t tried to answer that difficult question but say the risks were minimal because the well water was heavily diluted with treated lake water.



Gocelin Lopez, 5, swings in the shadow of a Crestwood water tower. For years, the village boasted that it had the cheapest water rates in Cook County.

However, it generally isn’t acceptable to rely on dilution to ensure water is safe to drink. One of the chemicals found in Crestwood’s well, vinyl chloride, is so toxic that the U.S. EPA says there is no safe level of exposure. “We know these things are carcinogens, and their presence in our drinking water doesn’t do us any good,” said David Ozonoff, a Boston University epidemiologist and PCE expert.

For years Crestwood was best known for its longtime mayor, Chester “Chet” Stranczek, a former minor league pitcher and trucking company owner who boasted that he ran the village like a business. Stranczek retired in 2007 after nearly four decades in office and was succeeded by his son, Robert. When the tightfisted Stranczek started rebating property taxes to every homeowner during the mid-1990s, the action was so unusual the National Enquirer declared Crestwood the “best-run town in America.”

Contaminants found

- **Perchloroethylene (PCE)**  
*Ingredient in aerosol dry-cleaning products*  
**EPA safe level:** Zero (for water)  
**Crestwood:** 1,300 ppb (soil sample in June 1996)
- **Vinyl chloride**  
*Breaks down PCE*  
**EPA safe level:** Zero  
**Crestwood:** 5.41 ppb (sample from well, September 2013)

NOTE: EPA safe levels are non-enforceable because of the science-based contaminant level established in the 1974 Safe Drinking Water Act