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New Report Credits A Century of City Intervention in Public Drinking Water Treatment with Saving Hundreds of Thousands of Infants, Children and Adults from Premature Death

Washington, D.C. - Today, The United States Conference of Mayors (USCM) released a new report: The Public Health Benefits of Investing in Municipal Water Treatment and Infrastructure Renewal. The Report provides mayors with useful information about the tremendous public health and safety benefits that local government investment have in providing safe drinking water.

While microbial waterborne illnesses remain a public health issue in developing countries, these diseases have virtually been eradicated in the U.S. over the past century as a result of city water treatment, medical intervention, and other factors. Today the predominant pathway of contamination related to acute infectious diseases in the developed world (U.S.) involves food and human contagion.

“Our nation’s cities took action to stem the deadly toll caused by microbes in public drinking water. And cities accomplished this decades before the U.S. EPA was established. Our cities continue to provide safe, world-class drinking water, and every new generation is spared thousands of premature deaths because cities continue to invest in protecting the water supply,” said U.S. Conference of Mayors CEO & Executive Director Tom Cochran.

The Report recounts an 1854 cholera outbreak in London and the subsequent scientific “detective work” that led to removing the pump handle from the Broad Street well, a water source that had spread deadly cholera to Londoners. Since then, thanks to a combination of the science of germ theory, and technical advances in microscopy, filtration, and chlorine disinfection, local governments have intervened in managing and treating water supplies to protect public health. The first continuous use of chlorine for drinking water disinfection in the US was implemented in 1908 in Jersey City, New Jersey, after which waterborne illnesses declined rapidly. The Report cites a National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) finding that estimated public health benefits realized by water treatment facilities between 1900 and 1936. NBER found that water treatment, specifically filtration and chlorination, was responsible for nearly: half of the total mortality reduction in major cities; three-quarters of the infant mortality reduction; and, two-thirds of the child mortality reduction.

The Report also discusses the need to identify and prioritize future water supply infrastructure investments that will protect the public health gains realized over the past century while providing the best “bang for the buck.”

The Conference continues to serve its member cities with information and best practices designed to advance the state-of-the-science in municipal government. The Mayors Water Council (MWC) provides a forum for Mayors to share knowledge on how to provide safe, adequate and affordable water and wastewater infrastructure and services in America’s principal cities in the 21st Century.

To view the full report, please visit: http://usmayors.org/urbanwater/media/2013/0618-report-WaterInvestment.pdf

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The U.S. Conference of Mayors is the official nonpartisan organization of cities with populations of 30,000 or more. There are 1,295 such cities in the country today, and each city is represented in the Conference by its chief elected official, the mayor. Like us on Facebook at facebook.com/usmayors, or follow us on Twitter at twitter.com/usmayors.