Water providers face numerous operational, administrative and regulatory challenges every day. Among the most important is our obligation to help minimize customers’ exposure to lead in water. A legacy from an earlier age, potential lead exposure through lead pipes and plumbing—whether from utility-owned service laterals, privately owned lines, or home fixtures, fittings and solder—is a looming threat to water utilities’ operational, financial and political stability. By undermining confidence in water quality, it can damage utilities’ reputations and undermine public support for their decisions. Most importantly, it is a challenge to the water community’s core mission of protecting public health.

In February 2016, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s Office of Water issued a memo to all EPA region directors that clearly identified lead as a high-priority issue. The EPA has consistently emphasized the importance of transparency on every level so the American public has enough information to make informed health decisions. It is clear that proactive, sustained public outreach is key in order to protect water customers and bolster consumer confidence.

Most water agencies—even those that have not yet fully defined the scope of the issue—recognize the potential threat that lead poses to some customers. The nature of the problem, however, defies simple solutions. The challenge of affordability—to both utilities and customers—is real, and shared responsibility for service line replacements can be a difficult concept to convey. While mitigation measures and the timeline to remove lead materials that come into contact with water may vary by each utility’s circumstances, one element that can be addressed decisively is customer outreach.

In its 2015 recommendations to the EPA, the National Drinking Water Advisory Council was emphatic that water providers actively and transparently communicate with their customers about lead to help them make informed decisions. The American Water Works Association (AWWA) strongly supports that position and encourages our members to proactively reach out to all potentially impacted stakeholders.

To help, the AWWA has developed informational materials specifically designed to support water providers’ communication efforts. This toolkit includes strategic guidance, messaging recommendations and ready-to-use tools and templates. It also incorporates sample materials from water utilities that have traveled this road and been willing to share valuable insights with their professional colleagues.

Those of us in the water community recognize the importance of protecting public health; providing customers with the information they need to make informed decisions is a critical facet of that responsibility.

The Issues:
Solving a puzzle without all the pieces

Addressing lead in a community water system is challenging for a variety of reasons. First, depending upon the system’s age, the locations of all lead service lines are often unknown. Even when there is a relatively complete inventory of utility-owned lead service lines, it is often unclear if the property owner’s portion of the service line contains lead. And, of course, on-site plumbing fixtures and joints are usually a complete mystery.

Elevated lead concentrations have been the subject of considerable discussion among regulators, utilities and public
health advocacy groups. However, communication with customers should not be limited to the time windows surrounding a potential or actual “lead event.” Certainly, it is critical to talk with customers—especially schools and other entities that serve children—about specific, short-term mitigation measures that can be implemented when increased lead levels are a possibility. However, it is equally if not more important to establish a trust-based relationship with customers by reaching out to them proactively. Customers should be aware of the health risks associated with lead, preventative measures they can take to protect their families, and ultimately, the importance of eliminating sources of lead from pipes and plumbing. It is through this type of forthright interaction that water providers will forge positive relationships with their customers and garner support for the investment that is necessary to fully eliminate the threat of lead in drinking water. This approach also rightfully puts some responsibility on customers to address lead issues on their side of the meter, just as they would expect utilities to remove lead components within the utility-owned portion of the water system.

Many water utilities don’t have complete records of lead service lines in the communities they serve. Utilities should recognize that it is prudent to acknowledge that fact, explain to customers how lead service lines came to be in the system, what if anything has been done to remove them, and the status of mitigation efforts. This candid approach to communication will usually be appreciated, as will explaining the utility’s corrosion control measures to reduce lead exposure. Information about sampling protocols and the associated state/federal testing requirements also serve to reinforce to the public that utilities are acting on their customers’ behalf.

The Basics:
Transparency, honesty are the keys to successful communication

Proven risk communication approaches are readily available to assist water utilities in addressing public concern about lead in water. At least four principles warrant special attention because they are relevant to all utility outreach, regardless of the context.

Provide honest, accurate and comprehensive information—Never downplay risks or tell only part of the story. Regardless of whether customers act on the information provided, they will respect the water provider for telling the truth. Acknowledging that lead service lines exist in the system—and that their locations are not entirely known—is paramount to this transparency.

Ensure your materials are easy to read and understandable for people with differing educational levels, and available in other languages if applicable—There is little point in conducting outreach if the materials are difficult for readers
to understand. Similarly, it is critical to avoid the tendency to use technical language or over-explain rather than expressing the issue in simple terms and recommending solutions where appropriate.

**Strengthen your message by partnering with community stakeholders**— When it comes to sensitive issues such as lead in drinking water, clear, consistent information is critical. However, it is important to remember that the source of the information can be as relevant to the public as the content. Inconsistent or—worse yet—contradictory guidance coming from different stakeholders can undermine the credibility of the information, leaving consumers confused and frustrated. For this reason, it is essential that water providers proactively reach out to others who may have something to say on the topic.

Moreover, collaborating with partners whose interests intersect with water providers’ amplifies the power of outreach, reaching members of the public who may not directly receive or respond to utility messages. By actively engaging other stakeholders on this issue, water providers can both minimize potential conflicts and maximize the effectiveness of their outreach campaign.

**Take the initiative in providing information to your community**— Being the first to communicate with customers about lead does more than allow you to define the message, which is important in its own right. It establishes your utility as the best information source on the subject. Utilities that fail to take the initiative risk allowing others—who are not necessarily qualified for the role—to position themselves as the arbiters of truth. When it comes to vulnerable subpopulations, such as children, early outreach is essential. Knowing that this is a constituency of particular concern, utilities should be reaching out to schools and child care centers well before the subject arises on its own.

**Tools and Lessons Learned:**

**Everything you need to communicate effectively**

When it comes to communicating with customers about lead, there is no need to reinvent the wheel. AWWA has developed a variety of materials—from sample website text to bill insert articles and Consumer Confidence Report language—to help water providers. Additionally, through its ongoing partnership with member agencies, AWWA has access to sample materials from water providers that have tried-and-true approaches to consumer outreach. Many of the AWWA materials are available electronically and can be customized to reflect an individual water utility’s branding standards.

**Materials provided in this toolkit include:**

- Consumer outreach tools such as a trifold brochure and handouts
- Recommended approaches for demonstrating your commitment to transparency
- Help for schools and child care centers
- Communications to other key stakeholders such as public officials and the plumbing community.
Other Resources:

While water utilities should strive to establish themselves as a credible source of information about lead, it is also beneficial to include links to objective external sources. This approach demonstrates to customers that the water provider is committed to transparency and wants people to fully understand the issue.

AWWA maintains consumer-oriented information about lead on www.drinktap.org, while the Environmental Protection Agency and U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have robust online materials on the subject. Many states also have lead programs that include information about testing and mitigation measures.

AWWA is a founding member of the Lead Service Line Replacement Collaborative. In January 2017, the Collaborative released an online toolkit to help communities voluntarily develop and implement lead service line (LSL) removal programs. The Collaborative’s toolkit includes a roadmap for getting started, suggested practices to identify and remove LSLs in a safe, equitable, and cost-effective manner, policies to consider to support local efforts, and links to additional resources that may be helpful when developing local programs.

www.drinktap.org
www.epa.gov/lead
www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead
www.lslr-collaborative.org