



Troy Hernandez, an environmental justice activist with Pilsen Environmental Rights and Reform Organization shows a piece of lead pipe obtained from his residence during his home renovation, April 9, 2021, in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood.
(AP/Shafkat Anowar)



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A coalition of Chicago Christian leaders is calling for swift removal of lead water pipes in Illinois, a state that ranks atop the nation in the toxic infrastructure that poses a danger to public health.

Ecumenism Metro Chicago, comprising 14 Christian denominations in the Windy City, called on federal and state lawmakers to "make every effort to replace all the lead water pipes in Illinois as quickly as possible."

The letter was issued Jan. 24 during an ecumenical prayer service at St. Gregory the Illuminator Armenian Apostolic Church in Chicago as part of the [Week of Prayer for Christian Unity](#). The Christian leaders, which includes the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago, also urged the Trump administration to reenter the Paris Agreement on climate change, from which the president has [withdrawn the country for a second time](#).

Auxiliary Bishop [Mark Bartosic](#) signed both environmental statements on behalf of the Chicago Archdiocese.

"In the words of our late Holy Father Francis, we must see that in creation 'Everything is connected' if we are to effectively 'listen both to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor,' " Bartosic, citing Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical, "[Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home](#)," said in a statement. "Things go very wrong when we overlook essential points of connection between us."



Auxiliary Bishop Mark Bartosic signs on behalf of the Chicago Archdiocese two Christian-organized letters — calling on lawmakers to rapidly replace lead pipes in Illinois and to reenter the Paris Agreement on climate change — during a Jan. 24, 2026, ecumenical prayer service at St. Gregory the Illuminator Armenian Apostolic Church in Chicago. (Deb Winarski)

Given the urgency of climate change and the need to preserve fresh water for present and future generations, "it is God's urgent call to all Christians to raise our voices together on behalf of God's precious creation," said the Rev. Carol McVetty, interim executive minister of the American Baptist Churches of Metro Chicago. "We must work together 'in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay,' " she said, quoting Romans 8:21.

In *Laudato Si'*, Francis wrote that "access to safe drinkable water is a basic and universal human right, since it is essential to human survival and, as such, is a condition for the exercise of other human rights."

Drinking water is one of the main sources of lead exposure in the U.S today, with Illinois alone estimated to have more than 1 million lead service lines, the highest in the nation, according to a 2023 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency [report](#).

Lead is a heavy metal and a neurotoxin. There is no safe level of exposure to lead, which when ingested can cause serious damage for people at all ages but especially children, said Dr. Philip Landrigan, director of the Program for Global Public Health and the Common Good at Boston College.

"The reason infants in the womb and young children are so vulnerable to lead is that their brains are still developing," he told EarthBeat. "Brain development is an extremely delicate, fragile process [that is] easily disrupted."

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Lead exposure in children has been linked to lower IQs, shorter attention spans and behavioral problems, which studies have tied to lowered earning potential throughout their lives. Lead has also been found in adults to increase blood pressure, heart disease, kidney damage and cancer. A [2018 study](#) in the journal The Lancet Public Health estimated lead exposure played a role in 412,000 deaths in the U.S. annually.

Landrigan began studying lead's health impacts in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a pediatrician, first at Boston Children's Hospital and then with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. His research helped spur federal actions to bar lead in paint (1978) and gasoline (1972). Those advances have led to a 95% drop in childhood lead poisoning and have made the disease a rarity.

But lead remains a danger, Landrigan said, primarily through two sources: old housing where lead paint is still present, and through drinking water serviced through lead pipes. In both cases, economically poor families and minority communities in the U.S. are disproportionately at risk.

That scenario is on display in Chicago.

A joint [investigation](#) in August by WBEZ, Inside Climate News and Grist mapped the city's estimated 412,000 lead pipes — tops in the nation — finding lead pipes widespread across Chicago (about 80% of homes) but with the burden greatest in Black and Latino neighborhoods. Roughly nine of every 10 service lines in both

CHICAGOLAND CHRISTIANS UNITED FOR THE CARE OF CREATION

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity
January 24, 2026

A CALL TO RESPECT LIFE:

**PROTECT CHILDREN, GRANDCHILDREN, FUTURE GENERATIONS
BY ADOPTING CLIMATE CHANGE MITIGATING STRATEGIES**

"Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live" Dt 30:19

On August 17, 2023 Ecumenism Metro Chicago (EMC) — Chicagoland Christians United for the Care of Creation established a declaration, recognizing God's gift of creation and our role to care, protect and preserve what is the Lord's (Psalm 24:1). Grounded in this declaration, EMC is calling the U.S. Government and all people and organizations of good will to mitigate the climate crisis and the deleterious impact it is having on our children, grandchildren and future generations.

Earth's average surface temperature in 2024 was the warmest on record, according to an analysis led by NASA scientists which continues to prove that climate change and its impacts on our earth is real.

In 2024, the United States passed the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) which aims to promote clean energy to reduce carbon emissions and the atmospheric temperature.

IRA investments in solar energy and wind energy projects increased significantly, thus furthering reduction of the rising atmospheric temperatures. We encourage all organizations to continue taking advantage of the IRA and increase our use of renewable energy.

Besides the mitigation of climate change, there are other environmental issues that need to be addressed like the over-consumption of natural resources and the decline in quality and quantity of freshwater. All organizations, whether public or not for profit must adopt "renowned, social and governance" (ESG) strategies to protect God's creation.

In addition to voluntary programs that institutions can adopt, there are global commitments that address the means for reducing climate change. One such commitment is the Paris Agreement, an international treaty which became effective in 2016, and today all members of the United Nations are parties to this treaty except for Iran, Libya, and Yemen.

However, on January 20, 2025, the United States government provided US Secretary General Antonio Guterres with notification of the United States of America's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement effective January 27, 2026.

Rooted in Ecumenism Metro Chicago's Chicagoland Christians United for the Care of Creation Declaration, we unequivocally state that the United States has a moral obligation to take the necessary legislative and administrative actions to have the United States rejoin the Paris Agreement.

Whereas, considering that the state and federal governments have created regulations and funding programs, the responsibility of lead service line replacement falls on the community water supplier, such as municipalities or local water districts.

Whereas, under the federal Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, states are required to allocate 49 percent of state lead service line replacement funds to grants or principal forgiveness loans and 51 percent in traditional low interest loans.

Whereas, in 2023 + U.S. Environmental Protection Agency report estimated the State of Illinois has more than 1 million lead service lines.

Whereas, in May of 2024 the U.S. EPA announced \$240,000,000 from the Investing in America grants to help Illinois identify and replace lead service lines. This funding builds on the Administration's Lead Pipe and Paint Action Plan and EPA's Get the Lead Out Initiative. The State of Illinois has the most lead pipes per capita in the United States.

Whereas, in 2021 the National Resource Defense Council (NRDC) estimated there to be 679,292 lead service lines in Illinois. In 2023, the U.S. EPA put the estimate at over one million lines in Illinois.

Whereas, the FY24 project list from the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (IEPA) included 47 projects, totaling over \$100 million. Illinois received around \$107 million in FY24 and will receive \$250 million in FY25 from federal funding.

Whereas, on March 7th, 2025 the IEPA announced the recipients to their from the fourth round of Lead Service Line Inventory (LSLI) grants, which will assist 15 additional community water suppliers (CWSs) in meeting the requirements outlined in the Lead Service Line Replacement and Notification Act (LSLRN Act). The LSLI Grant program offers grants to local government units ranging from \$25,000 - \$500,000 to fund the creation of a complete lead service line inventory. A total of 264 Illinois drinking water systems have benefited from this funding since the LSLI grant program was announced in October 2022.

Wherefore, Be It Resolved We Plead a Call to Respect Life, then, to insist Congress and the Illinois representation make every effort to replace all the lead water pipes in Illinois as quickly as possible.

CHICAGOLAND CHRISTIANS UNITED FOR THE CARE OF CREATION

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity
January 24, 2026

A CALL TO RESPECT LIFE:

**PROTECT CHILDREN, GRANDCHILDREN, FUTURE GENERATIONS
BY PROVIDING CLEAN, SAFE DRINKING WATER**

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Signatories:

<u>Rev. Carol Ann White</u> American Baptist Church of Metro Chicago	<u>Rev. Rick</u> Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Metropolitan Chicago Synod	<u>Rev. Eugene</u> St. Thomas Episcopalian Catholic Church, Diocese of Chicago	<u>Rev. Carol Ann White</u> American Baptist Church of Metro Chicago	<u>Rev. Eugene</u> St. Thomas Episcopalian Catholic Church, Diocese of Chicago	<u>Rev. Eugene</u> St. Thomas Episcopalian Catholic Church, Diocese of Chicago
<u>Rev. Paul</u> American Orthodox Church, Diocese of the American Church of Eastern Europe	<u>Rev. Paul</u> Greek Orthodox Church, Metropolitan of Chicago	<u>Rev. Paul</u> The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church Eparchy of Nashville	<u>Rev. Paul</u> American Orthodox Church, Diocese of the American Church of Eastern Europe	<u>Rev. Paul</u> Greek Orthodox Church, Metropolitan of Chicago	<u>Rev. Paul</u> The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church Eparchy of Nashville
<u>Rev. Paul</u> Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, East Springfield District	<u>Rev. Paul</u> Presbyterian Church (USA), Presbytery of Chicago	<u>Rev. Paul</u> The United Church of Christ, Illinois Conference	<u>Rev. Paul</u> Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, East Springfield District	<u>Rev. Paul</u> Presbyterian Church (USA), Presbytery of Chicago	<u>Rev. Paul</u> The United Church of Christ, Illinois Conference
<u>Rev. Paul</u> Church of the Brethren Illinois District	<u>Rev. Paul</u> The Roman Catholic Church, Archdiocese of Chicago	<u>Rev. Paul</u> The United Methodist Church, Northern Illinois - Wisconsin Episcopal Area	<u>Rev. Paul</u> Church of the Brethren Illinois District	<u>Rev. Paul</u> The Roman Catholic Church, Archdiocese of Chicago	<u>Rev. Paul</u> The United Methodist Church, Northern Illinois - Wisconsin Episcopal Area
<u>Rev. Paul</u> The Evangelical Church of Chicago	<u>Rev. Paul</u> The Salvation Army North & Central Illinois Division		<u>Rev. Paul</u> The Evangelical Church of Chicago	<u>Rev. Paul</u> The Salvation Army North & Central Illinois Division	

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In 1986, the federal government banned the installation of new lead service lines, but it did not require replacement of old ones. Up until that point, Chicago required the use of lead pipes, a result of political and union [dealings](#).

In October 2024, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency [issued](#) a final rule requiring utilities to identify and replace lead pipes nationwide within a decade. The 2022 bipartisan infrastructure law included \$15 billion over five years for replacing lead service lines as part of \$50 billion toward [improving](#) drinking water.

Both developments were "a huge win," said Roya Alkafaji, an expert in lead with the Healthy Communities program of the Environmental Defense Fund.

"We have seen a lot of momentum across the country, but of course, there is still a lot of progress to be making," she said.

In December, the EPA under the Trump administration released the penultimate \$3 billion of that funding six months late. In January, Congress passed an appropriations bill that cut \$125 million from the law's final \$3 billion allocation.

The EPA late last year also adjusted its estimate for total lead pipes in the country, from 9 million to 4 million. That [revision](#), which reduces by nearly half Illinois' lead pipe estimate, has been questioned by environmental groups. They say the EPA's new estimate relies on incomplete reporting from state utilities, underestimates the percent of service lines of unknown materials likely to contain lead, and omits service lines that include lead-based connecting components.



George Nassos, a member of the Greek Orthodox Church, carries two letters from Chicagoland Christian leaders calling for environmental actions during a Prayer

Service Jan. 24, 2026, during the Week of Prayer of Christian Unity at St. Gregory the Illuminator Armenian Apostolic Church in Chicago. (Deb Winarski)

Chicago leaders have projected the city will replace all its lead pipes by 2076 — or several decades after the timeline [mandated](#) by EPA's updated lead and copper rule.

The calls by Ecumenism Metro Chicago for rapid replacement of Illinois' lead pipes and a U.S. return to the Paris climate accord stemmed from the group's 2023 [Chicagoland Christians United for the Care of Creation Declaration](#). The declaration stated, "Taking decisive, restorative action for creation is a moral and religious imperative."

George Nassos, a chemical engineer and member of the Greek Orthodox Church who carried the two environmental statements during the opening procession at the Christian unity prayer service, said the documents reflected the shared Christian obligation to care for God's creation "and to make the Earth a better environment for everybody."

"We're looking for the Illinois EPA and the U.S. EPA to do everything possible to fund the removal of these lead water pipes as quickly as possible," he said, "because they're so crucial to everybody living in this area and particularly the young generation."