

SOUTH MEMPHIS

Neighborhood studies next step against cancer-causing chemical

By [Keely Brewer](#), Daily Memphian

Updated: June 03, 2023 7:37 PM CT | Published: June 03, 2023 7:26 PM CT



Mallory Heights Community President Vera Holmes (left) and KeShaun Pearson (right) hold town hall meeting addressing the EtO pollution from the local sterilization plant in South Memphis on Saturday, June 3, 2023.

(Ziggy Mack/Special to The Daily Memphian)

Dozens of people concerned about a cancer-causing chemical filled the pews of Shady Grove Missionary Baptist Church Saturday. The gathering oscillated between tearful recollections of loved ones lost to cancer, to rallying cries against air pollution.

The pollutant of concern is ethylene oxide, or EtO. The chemical has been on the community's radar since late last summer, when the Environmental Protection Agency identified 23 high-risk polluters, including Sterilization Services of Tennessee on Florida Street, which has used the chemical to sterilize medical equipment for nearly 50 years.

The deadline to comment on EPA's proposed regulations is June 27, and on June 7, the same groups that organized Saturday's meeting are offering a workshop for residents who need help submitting comment.

In the nave of Shady Grove Missionary Baptist Church at 1821 Kansas St., a group of South Memphians tallied the number of family members who have died of cancer. Eric Winston, the pastor at Mt. Zion Baptist Church, counted his mother, father and two brothers.

New EPA rules could cut EtO emissions by 80% in South Memphis

"I don't want my children to stand up and say that I died of cancer," said Winston, who saw the meeting as a rallying cry for Memphians.

People living closest to the Southwest Memphis sterilizer face a lifetime cancer risk of about 2,000 in a million, in addition to their risk of developing cancer for any other reason — and Vera Holmes, president of the Mallory Heights Community Development Corp., reminded residents that their neighborhoods are more likely to be exposed to a litany of pollutants, not just EtO.

Holmes' uncle, Sydney Porter, sat in a pew near the back of the crowd. He likened decades of unknown EtO exposure to his time in the Marine Corps, where he was exposed to Agent Orange.

"Everybody said it was just something to kill the vegetation," Porter said. "People lie to us all the time."

County urges South Memphis facility to reduce cancer-causing emissions



Experts question cancer cluster study

Meeting organizers from Memphis Community Against Pollution and the Mallory Heights Community Development Corp. said they invited health department representatives, along with elected officials. None attended except Rep. Steve Cohen, who briefly shared plans to contact Sterilization Services and, if necessary, introduce legislation.



Congressman Steve Cohen (center) attends Mallory Heights Community town hall meeting, where he said, “I’m here because you’re here, and you’re in danger...” (Ziggy Mack/Special to The Daily Memphian)

“I’m here because you’re here, and you’re in danger ... This is just unacceptable that our health department has failed us and that this company hasn’t jumped in and taken action,” Cohen said.

In the 10 months since Sterilization Services appeared on the EPA’s list, the Memphis City Council and Shelby County Commission have both passed resolutions urging action; the EPA has proposed stricter emissions regulations for the chemical; and the Shelby County Health Department has hosted meetings and conducted a cancer cluster study.

Health Department study finds no cancer clusters near EtO producer

The chemical has been linked to leukemia, Non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, stomach cancer and breast cancer, so the Shelby County Health Department partnered with the Tennessee Department of Health to see if there was a cluster of cases near the facility. The study, released in late March, found no evidence of cancer clusters near Sterilization Services.



The health department did not respond in time for publication, but at a meeting in March, its director, Dr. Michelle Taylor, said the lack of cancer clusters doesn't necessarily mean there's not a higher risk.

Scientists gauge Mallory Heights' cancer risk from EtO

At the Southern Environmental Law Center's request, Elizabeth Kamai and Corinna Keeler — an epidemiologist and public health research scientist, respectively — reviewed the cancer cluster study. The environmental law group compensated Kamai, while Keeler volunteered her assessment.

This type of study can determine whether there's a higher-than-expected number of cancer cases in a given area and can be a useful tool to better understand where a possible carcinogenic source might be located. But, in their assessment released earlier this week, Kamai and Keeler said a cancer cluster study is inappropriate when there is a known carcinogen, like EtO.

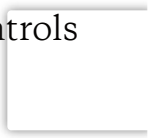
Health Department launches first specific cancer-cluster study

The two public health experts also said the study didn't follow Centers for Disease Control guidelines. Decisions about the study size and the time frame included limited the study's statistical power, according to their report; even if there were cancer clusters in the area, this study's design likely wouldn't detect it.

Community eyes next steps

In March, the health department previewed plans for two EtO-specific studies, but the timelines are unknown. In the meantime, the EPA is returning to Memphis on June 8 — a few weeks before the deadline to comment on its proposed EtO regulations.

The EPA's much-anticipated proposal applies to 86 facilities across the country, including Sterilization Services. The new rule, which pairs stricter pollution controls





Cancer survivor and community resident Clifton Brown speaks Saturday at the meeting at Shady Grove Missionary Baptist Church. (Ziggy Mack/Special to The Daily Memphian)

with advanced monitoring methods, would cut EtO emissions from commercial sterilizers by about 80% and bring emissions within the legally acceptable cancer risk.

The deadline to comment on EPA's proposed regulations is June 27, and on June 7, the same groups that organized Saturday's meeting are offering a workshop for residents who need help submitting comment.

The EPA's timeline could mean lower emissions by 2025, but the Southern Environmental Law Center — on behalf of community advocates — has pressured the Shelby County Health Department to use its emergency powers to reduce emissions sooner. Amanda Garcia, director of the Southern Environmental Law Center's Tennessee office, said the health department has the authority to force a company to cut emissions if there's a threat to public health.

The health department disagrees, but Garcia's team appealed the opinion. A hearing is set for late August.

EPA is monitoring possible cancer-causing emissions in Southwest Memphis

As regulatory processes unfold — locally, with the health department's appeal, and federally, with the EPA's proposed emissions limits — Memphis Community Against Pollution wants to take action sooner. Through an EPA grant, it's one of 18 communities getting an air pollution monitor, since the health department's existing network of air monitors doesn't include southwest Memphis.

KeShaun Pearson, president of Memphis Community Against Pollution, said he hopes it gives them data to inform their advocacy.

“This is South Memphis. This is not the path of least resistance,” said Pearson, harkening to comments made during the organization’s opposition to a proposed pipeline. “This is the path of resilience.”



Mallory Heights neighbors gathered Saturday, June 3, at Shady Grove Missionary Baptist Church, 1821 Kansas St. (Ziggy Mack/Special to The Daily Memphian)

TOPICS

ETHYLENE OXIDE MEMPHIS COMMUNITY AGAINST POLLUTION MALLORY HEIGHTS
SHELBY COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT STERILIZATION SERVICES OF TENNESSEE



Keely Brewer

Keely Brewer is a Report for America corps member covering environmental impacts on communities of color in Memphis. She is working in partnership with the Ag & Water Desk, a sustainable reporting network aimed at telling water and agriculture stories across the Mississippi River Basin.