

Bronx Legionnaires' Outbreak Is Over, Health Officials Say

By [WINNIE HU](#) AUG. 20, 2015

New York City health officials on Thursday declared an outbreak of Legionnaires' disease in the South Bronx officially over, saying that no new cases had been reported since Aug. 3.

The officials, citing test results, also confirmed they had traced the source of the outbreak to a contaminated cooling tower on top of the [Opera House Hotel](#) on East 149th Street. The finding, which was widely expected, was a blow for the hotel that opened two years ago after a multimillion-dollar renovation of a historic theater building in a poor neighborhood.

The outbreak of Legionnaires' disease — the worst in the city's history — has claimed 12 lives and sickened more than 120 people since early July in the South Bronx, where residents have [asthma](#), [diabetes](#) and other health issues. In response, city health officials ordered this month that every building with a cooling tower had to disinfect it within two weeks of receiving the notice.

The outbreak has also spurred a host of legislative and regulatory efforts intended to prevent similar outbreaks, including a new measure requiring building owners to conduct quarterly inspections of cooling towers.

The hotel's cooling tower was one of five that initially tested positive for the Legionella bacteria. Since then other cooling towers have tested positive, but city health officials have repeatedly said they believe the outbreak started with one or more of the original five cooling towers.

In a statement released Thursday, the Opera House Hotel said that the city's

finding was “obviously disappointing.”

“It’s particularly disappointing because our system is two years old, has the most up-to-date technology available and our maintenance plan has been consistent with the regulations that both the city and the state are putting in place,” the statement read.

Hotel officials have previously said that the [tower was cleaned](#) by an in-house engineering department on a regular basis, following industry guidelines. The hotel had also contracted with an outside company, the Metro Group, to perform monthly checks of the chemicals used to help control biological growth in the tower, though those checks did not test for the presence of bacteria.

The hotel, in its statement, noted that it had worked closely with city and state officials, and that tests completed on Wednesday showed that its tower was clear of Legionella. In addition, the hotel pledged to test its cooling tower every 30 days when it is in operation.

Mychal Johnson, 50, a co-founder of South Bronx Unite, an environmental group, said that while the hotel had provided a much-needed service in the South Bronx, he did not understand how its tower had been contaminated with Legionella. “I think we need to carefully find out the facts as to how this state-of-the-art facility — a brand-new facility — could have these issues,” he said.

Mr. Johnson added that the outbreak had underscored a larger health issue in the South Bronx, pointing out that many residents had asthma and other respiratory illnesses, which made them more susceptible to Legionnaires’ disease. “City agencies came to this community because of the Legionnaires’ outbreak, but the epidemic of our high rates of asthma still exists and needs that same attention, if not more,” he said.

