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Instead of controlling toxics, state department is protecting industry

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In 2011, my family fled our home of five years in Wildomar in fear for our lives. There were no wildfires, or flood waters. We left because our house was built on soil so toxic that we struggled to breathe and suffered repeated bouts of pneumonia, bloody noses, tremors, bone and muscle pain, and more.

Every Californian — regardless of their ZIP code, skin color, or income — deserves equal access to clean water, fresh air and a healthy environment. But contrary to our reputation as the nation's leader in groundbreaking environmental solutions, our state faces an environmental health and justice crisis.

Low-income communities and communities of color are disproportionately and systematically poisoned by industrial pollution, including toxic landfills, garbage dumps, refineries and steel manufacturing plants. These residents have a higher risk for asthma, cardiovascular and respiratory disease, diabetes, cancer and birth defects.

There is a state agency to protect Californians, the Department of Toxic Substances Control. Unfortunately, it was more interested in protecting the economic interests of industry than the health of our community. At first, the department [ignored our complaints](#), then did everything in its power to obfuscate the truth.

The time for reform is now. In 2015, outraged residents formed the [People's Senate](#), a statewide network of 14 communities next to hazardous waste facilities or clean-up sites. Also that year, Senate Bill 83 established an Independent Review Panel within DTSC to recommend improvements to the department. And this year, state Sen. Connie Leyva, a

Chino Democrat, has introduced [Senate Bill 774](#) that would create an independent board to govern and oversee DTSC.

After years of mismanagement, leadership turnover and high-profile disasters, DTSC has finally taken steps to reform itself. But more must be done. It's time for effective, transparent and accountable oversight of a failing agency.

By the time we left our home behind, the damage was done. I now suffer from an autoimmune disease. For the rest of my life, my immune system may mistakenly attack healthy cells rather than protect me from disease and infection. But my story and the story of Wildomar is only one of many failures by DTSC.

For decades, the Exide battery recycling plant in southeast Los Angeles exposed thousands of children to very high levels of toxic lead. Residents who live near the Kettleman Hills hazardous waste facility, one of the country's largest landfills, have suffered birth defects. The Santa Susana Field Laboratory above the Simi and San Fernando valleys left behind radioactive contamination linked to elevated rates of certain cancers. And the Jordan Downs housing project in Los Angeles is still plagued by dangerous levels of industrial pollutants.

In case after case, DTSC [let serial polluters operate](#) on expired permits for years, levied wrist-slap penalties instead of maximum fines and sat on its hands while companies poisoned communities. The department has a legal obligation to protect those communities. It's time for state to demand that DTSC puts human and environmental health over the profits of the "poison industry."

We must adopt the recommendations put forth by the independent review panel and the People's Senate. The Legislature must pass SB 744 and Gov. Jerry Brown must sign it this year.

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