



Toxic town: The West Virginia community where cancer rates are **FOUR TIMES** the national average and residents point to chemical dumps as the cause as they attend 'one funeral after another'

- › Minden, West Virginia is a riverside town which once thrived on coal mining. Residents have noticed elevated sickness rates for at least the past 30 years
- › One 62-year-old grandmother, Susie Worley-Jenkins, has been diagnosed with cancer four times; her husband survived leukemia and multiple skin cancer diagnoses; and her best friend died of a brain tumor
- › Worley-Jenkins and other residents have banded together to form a grassroots effort with the hope of pressuring authorities to identify and stop the cause
- › Dr Hassan Amjad dedicated his life to documenting the cancer rates and calling for justice before his death from a sudden illness in August
- › The Environmental Protection Agency found now-defunct company Shaffer Equipment dumped electrical equipment laden with toxic chemicals on the coal company's mine site, which is now abandoned, in the center of Minden
- › Minden received Superfund money, designated for toxic cleanup sites, in the 1980s but residents fear chemicals remain and fracking could be further contaminating the area
- › One state statistician wrote, in an email seen by DailyMail.com, that the 'much higher cancer death rate' in Minden than the surrounding county was 'concerning,' given the tiny population rate
- › Authorities have repeatedly insisted that water levels are safe but the EPA conducted testing again this summer, though results for Minden have not been released
- › The national average cancer mortality rate is 171 per 100,000 - 642.1 per 100,000 and Dr Amjad found rates in previous years a
- › The real rates in Minden could be even higher as a result of flaw



By [JORDAN GASS-POORE FOR DAILYMAIL.COM](#) and [SHEILA FLYNN FOR DA](#)
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When Susie Worley-Jenkins survived cervical **cancer** after being diagnosed at 22 years old, she hoped that she was done with the disease. It was 1979, and she had no idea what was coming.

Thirty-five years later, she was diagnosed with cancer in her left breast. Then her right breast. Then she got cancerous moles on her hand and nose.

In her 62 years, Ms Worley-Jenkins says she has had four cancer diagnoses – and she’s not the only one. Her husband, Randy Jenkins, has been diagnosed with skin cancer four times and was treated in 1999 for leukemia. Months later her childhood friend died of a brain tumor.

‘I just went to one funeral, then another funeral, then another funeral, and I said, “This ain’t right. Not that many people should die that quickly”,’ she tells DailyMail.com.

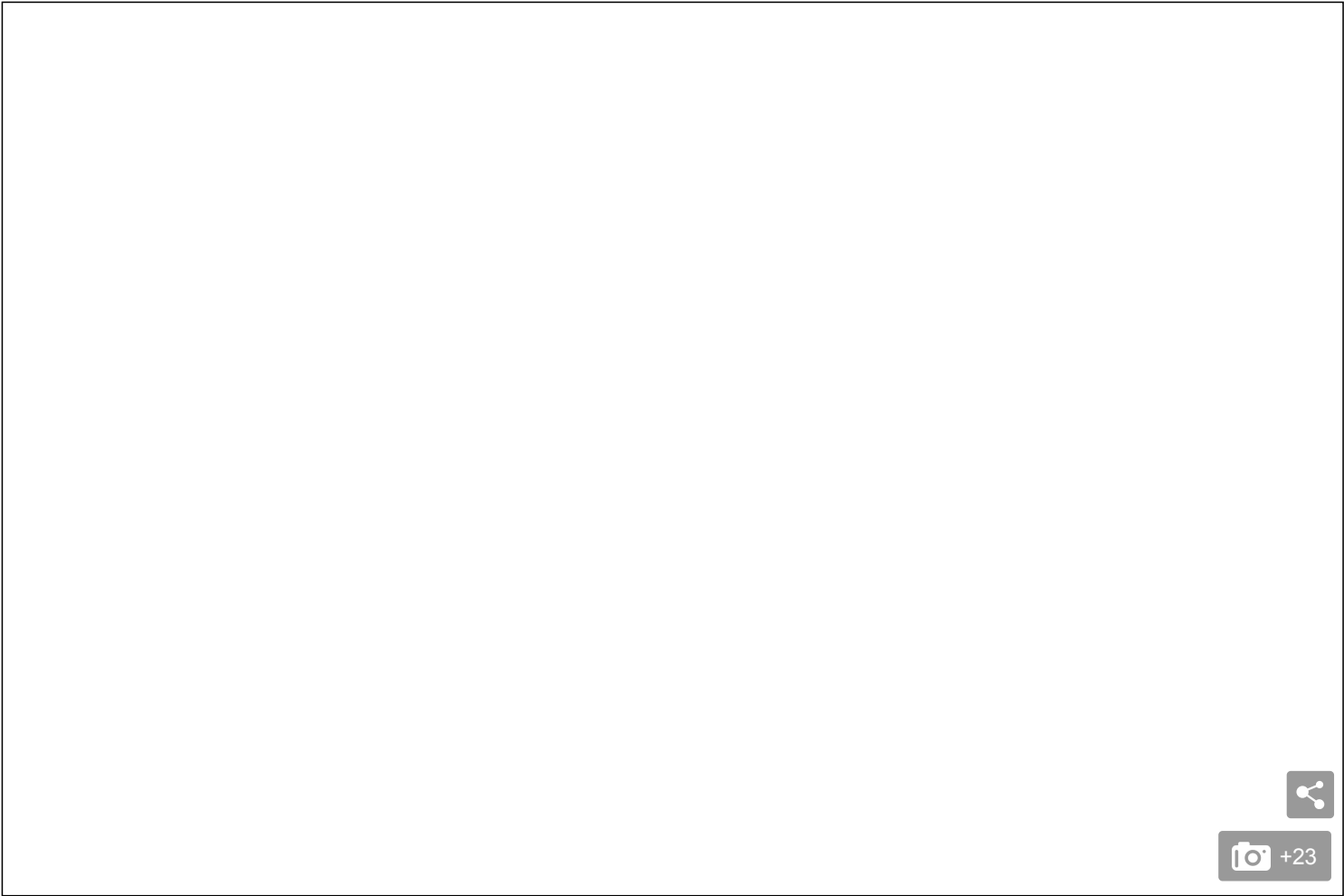
Something had to be wrong in her small town of Minden, West Virginia, she reasoned. She knew of many other families suffering with cancers, birth defects and chemical burns - and began going door-to-door in Minden four years ago making an informal survey. She was stunned to find that nearly every household she visited was privately dealing with some type of ‘horrendous’ health condition.

‘My friends were dying of cancer. Their grandkids have brain tumors, and I’m not talking about people old like me or older than me and stuff – I’m talking about 15-year-old kids,’ Ms Worley-Jenkins says.

The high sickness levels, she believes, can all be attributed to contaminated water. The area has a cancer rate that’s nearly four times higher than the national average, and a local doctor spent decades trying to link that to pollution from industrial byproducts.

SCROLL DOWN FOR VIDEO





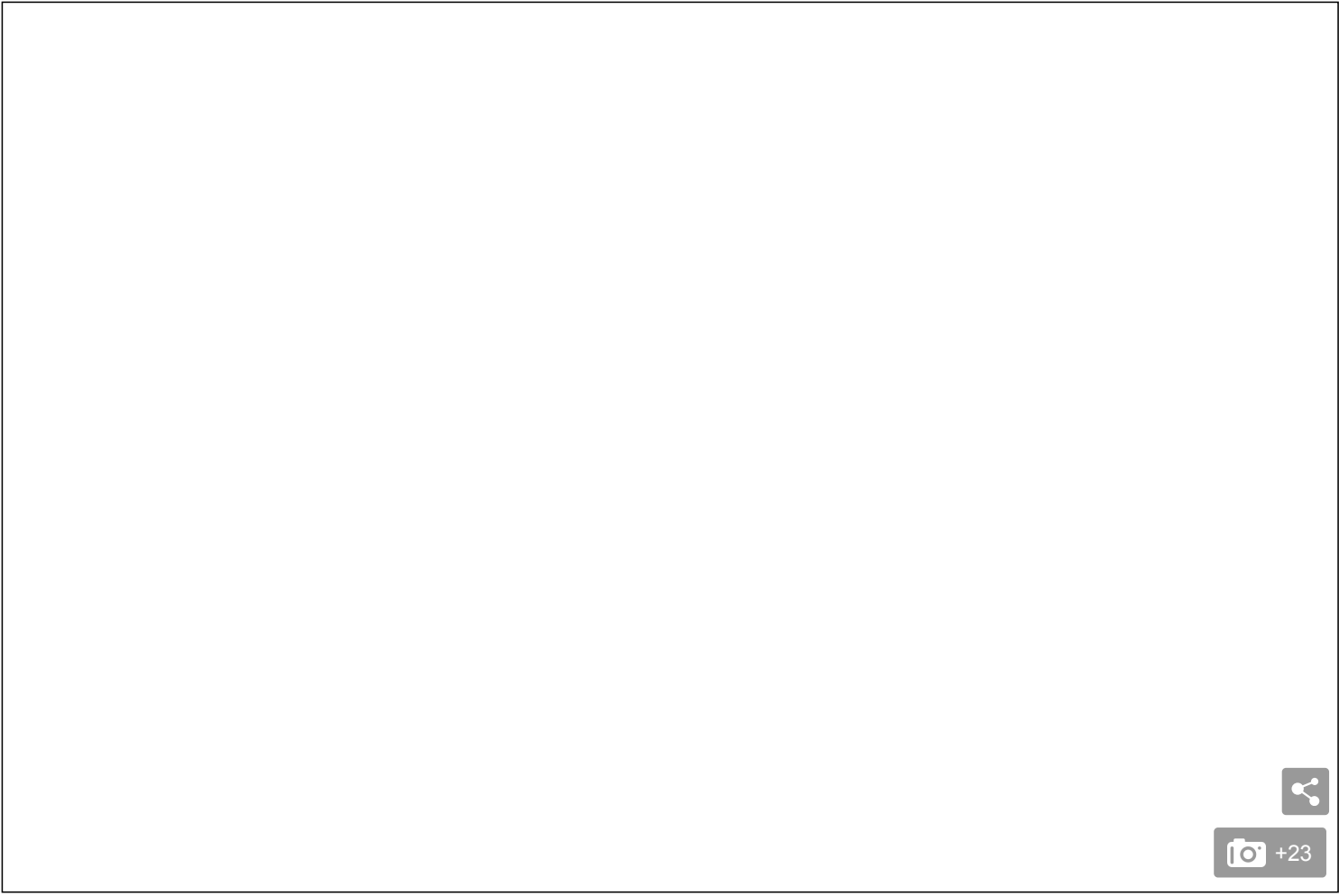
Minden, West Virginia - in the southern part of the state - is a sleepy community of about 250 residents which used to be a thriving mining town





Susie Worley-Jenkins, 62, was first diagnosed with cervical cancer 40 years ago - but has since been diagnosed with breast cancer and skin cancer





The New River near Minden, West Virginia flows through Fayette County and is both a source of drinking water and recreation for thousands of people

An investigation by DailyMail.com found an environmental disaster that began more than a century ago with the coal-mining industry and went on to include dumped toxic chemicals – leading the Environmental Protection Agency to fund clean-up with Superfund money, designated for hazardous waste sites. Now residents fear nearby fracking by oil and gas companies could be further contaminating their water and region, and Fayette County officials have already banned natural gas or oil waste within county borders amidst concerns about possible pollution.

Recent academic studies have recorded worrying trends associated with the loosely-regulated fracking industry, identifying a higher number of hospitalizations among people living near fracking sites. And while the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources has denied a cancer cluster, at least one state statistician has expressed concern at the Minden levels in an email seen by DailyMail.com.

DailyMail.com spoke with officials and examined numerous documents, including pertinent reports, studies and correspondence – and the findings support Ms Worley-Jenkins’ initial concerns.

There is something wrong with Minden.

Sleepy riverside town that became a dumping ground for toxic chemicals. Residents were exposed to elevated levels of toxic chemicals.

Minden is a sleepy riverside town of 250 residents, mostly poor and rural, in Fayette County, southern West Virginia. But during the 1970s, ne...



rebuilt electrical substations for the local coal mining industry, dumped industrial products or chemicals called polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in the area.

The EPA found that Shaffer – which had employed Randy Jenkins – had dumped electrical equipment laden with PCB oil on the coal company’s now-abandoned mine site in the center of Minden. The predominant practice was to store the fluid in containers, but the agency found that even when the company followed protocol, some of the fluid leaked onto the ground.

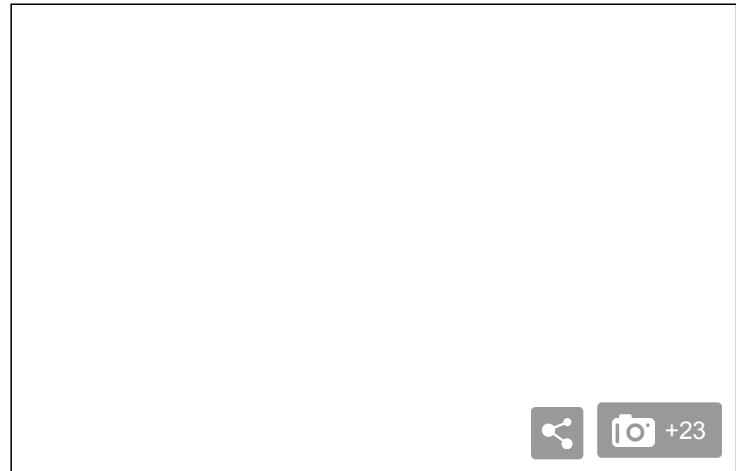
Since Shaffer abandoned Minden in the early 1980s, the town has received funding from the EPA’s Superfund program, designed to fund the clean-up of the country’s most complex or uncontrolled hazardous waste sites.

Although the area received funding from this program, it was never actually deemed a Superfund site on the EPA’s National Priorities List of most contaminated sites – a common occurrence for places that the agency believes only require ‘immediate, short-term responses’, according to an EPA spokesman.

Ms Worley-Jenkins says she’s seen 80 neighbors, even their pets, die in the past two decades – all victims of cancer. She’s created a list of 237 people who she says have been diagnosed or died with the disease during this time – and the number of those affected continues to grow.

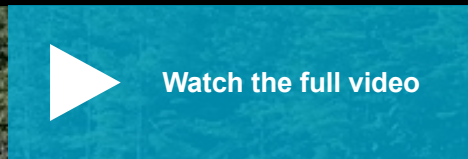
After she was diagnosed with cancer in both of her breasts, Ms Worley-Jenkins’s one-story home became a staging ground for an environmental justice fight. She has emerged as the leader of a group of residents demanding residential buyouts from the state. But the effort to identify a root cause of the sickness rates extends far beyond Ms Worley-Jenkins.

Dr Hassan Amjad, an oncologist and hematologist in nearby Beckley, considered it his life’s work to document the high cancer rates in the Minden area. He was conducting a study on the possible link between PCB contamination and cancer patients when he died suddenly in August, weeks after speaking with DailyMail.com for this investigation and sharing his research and information.



Minden, in the southern part of West Virginia, has seen cancer mortality rates that are three times the state and nearly four times the national average

Cancer town: West Virginia community devastated by toxic water





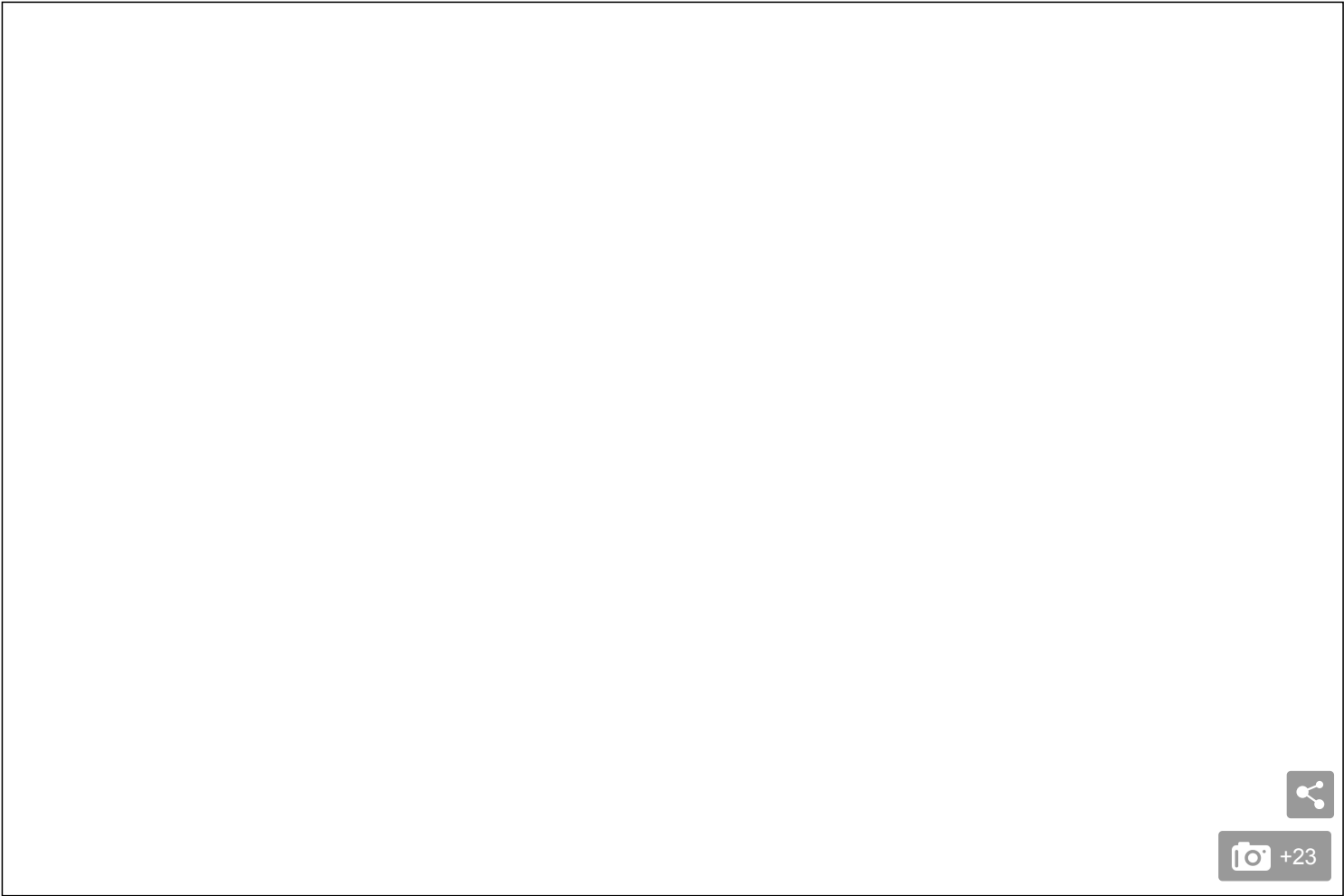
Dr Hassan Amjad, an oncologist and hematologist in nearby Beckley, spent decades studying the cancer rates in Minden before he passed away from a sudden illness in August





Dr Amjad told DailyMail.com that Minden residents for decades were exposed to wildly elevated of toxic PCB chemicals by the now-defunct company Shaffer Equipment





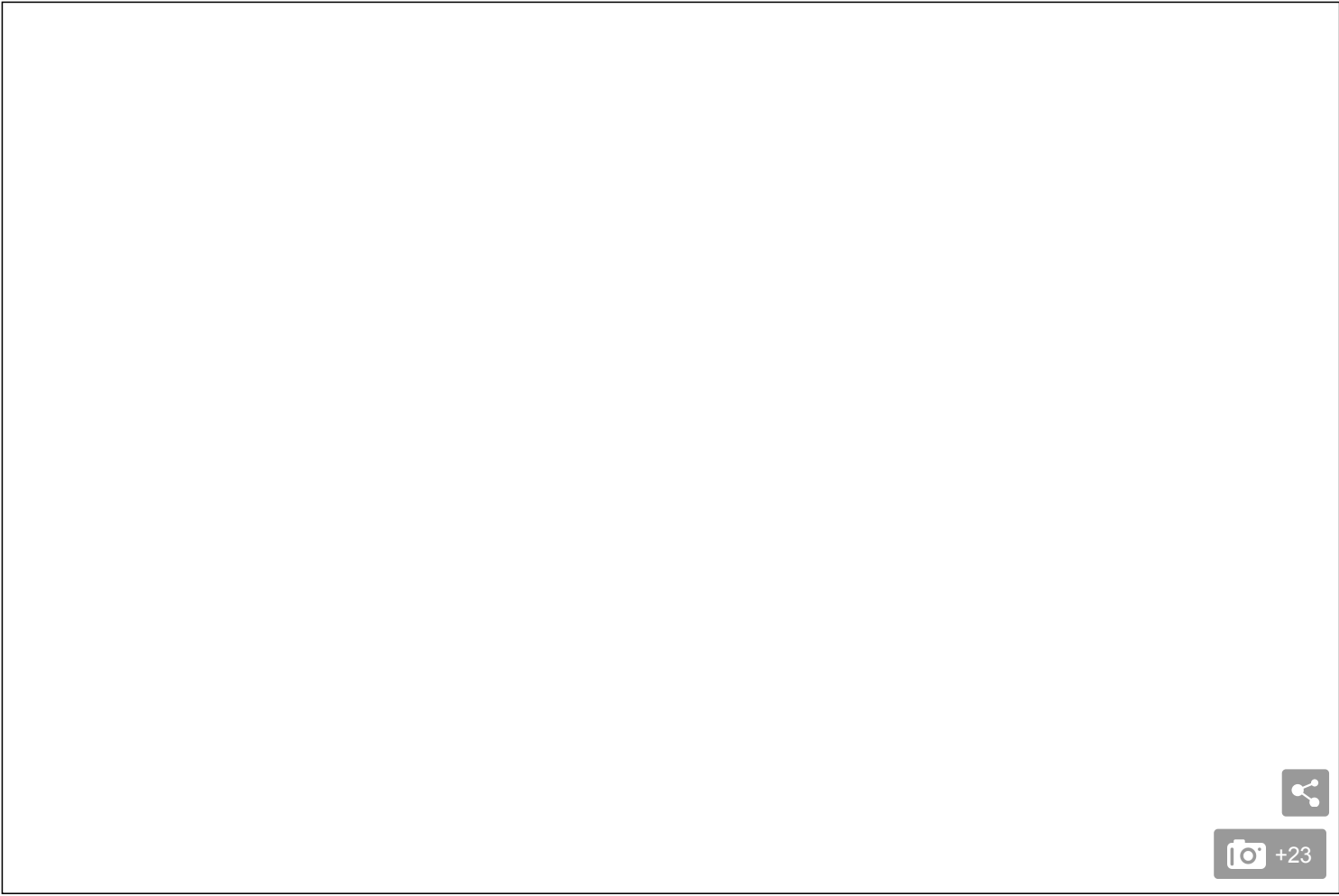
Residents are worried that, in addition to contamination from years of coal mining and byproducts in the area, nearby fracking projects such as this one will add further toxicity to the local water supplies and soil





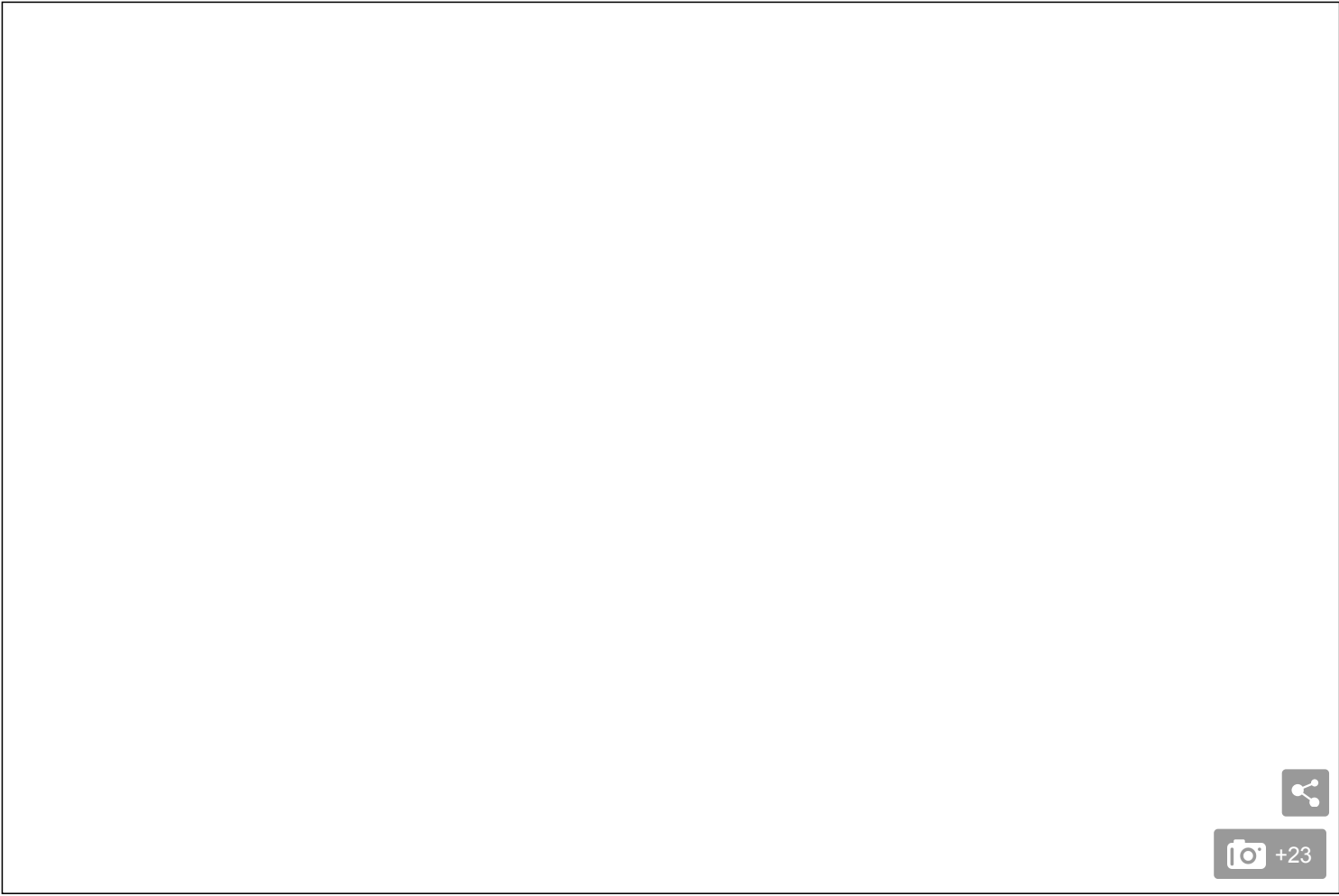
Suspected contamination can be seen in Arbuckle Creek in Minden, West Virginia; locals point to various locations around the area which they believe are polluted with toxic chemicals





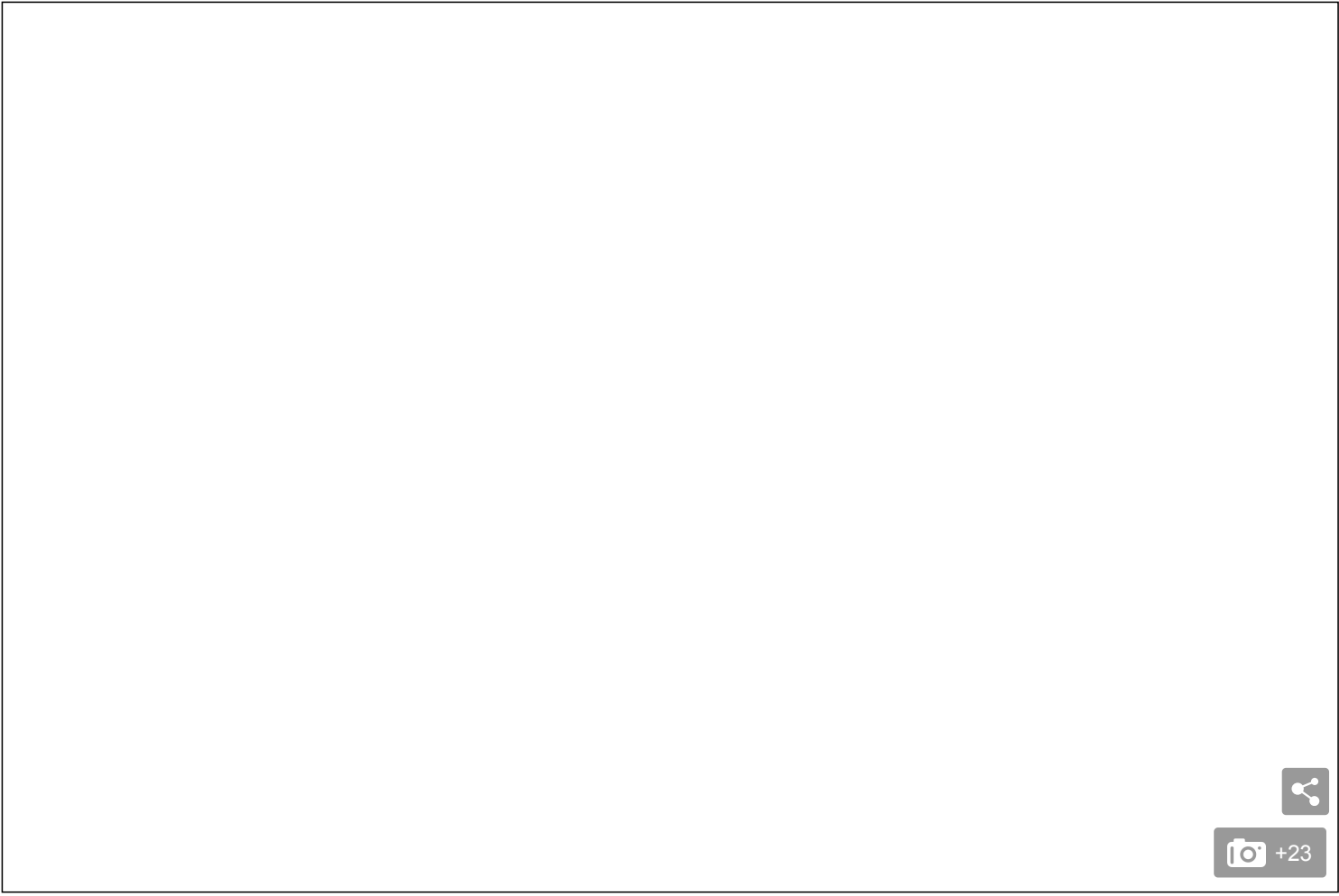
Ms Worley-Jenkins says she doesn't want her 10 grandchildren, two of whom have chronic illnesses, to shoulder the burden of pollution in the area





The one-storey home of Ms Worley-Jenkins has become a staging point in locals' efforts to raise awareness about their high levels of sickness and lobby for change





Minden residents often buy bottled water that eats into already tight household budgets; all along people’s fences in the town, dozens of plastic gallon water jugs pile up because they don’t think it’s safe to drink from the tap

According to his research, Minden's cancer rates far exceeded those nationally; while the cancer mortality rate is currently 171 per 100,000 in the US, he found that Minden's was as high as 692 – and, in previous years, had climbed as high as 2,092 per 100,000.

The West Virginia Health Statistics Center reported that from 1979-2016, the cancer death rate was 642.1 per 100,000 - more than twice that of Fayette County's 279.1, already significantly higher than the national average. Dr Amjad believed the real toll is likely even higher because of flawed reporting or sufferers who left the area.

Shaffer was among the county’s worst polluters, said Dr Amjad, claiming that Minden residents for decades were exposed to wildly elevated levels of PCBs. They were commonly used to insulate electrical equipment until 1979, when the EPA banned them as a ‘possible’ human carcinogen.

A June 1993 public health assessment by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry identified potential ways people could be exposed to PCBs in Minden. This included going to the grounds of the fenced-in Shaffer site, on-site workers in the Shaffer equipment building, children playing in yards and Arbutle Creek and as people eating snap turtles from the area.

The toxic history of Minden in coal-mining country

Minden, West Virginia was once a thriving coal town in Fayette County. Today, deaths are nearly four times higher than the national average, which residents believe is owed in part to the dumping of PCBs by Shaffer Equipment, a now-defunct company that for decades churned toxic chemicals into the atmosphere while rebuilding electrical substations for



Dr Amjad worked with various hospitals in southern West Virginia for more than 20 years; he told DailyMail.com that, after speaking with cancer patients who live or have lived in Minden and studying their medical records, at least 36 per cent of residents have been diagnosed with a form of cancer. He publicly called out the EPA for failing to protect Minden residents for more than two decades.

His daughter, Dr Ayne Amjad, 39, watched her father fight for the people of Minden from a young age and actively helped him as she, too, became a physician and obtained a masters in public health.

She tells DailyMail.com that her father always reasoned: 'If I'm going to be recognized for any efforts in my life, I would like it to be for the people of Minden.'

'That was a big thing for him - probably his most passionate project that I could recall, and he did a lot of stuff,' she says. 'Every day he would text me or call me with some exciting news, showing me all the emails, showing me everything that's going on.'

'He was very passionate that ... something would be done, at least recognize that the people of Minden were disadvantaged mainly, he felt, because of their economic status and because of where we live and so forth - that they got dumped on literally and didn't get any help, even though he was fighting for that since the early 80s.'

Dr Amjad had turned 70 just days before his death, which came quickly, though he had struggled with conditions such as diabetes and heart disease, says his daughter - who intends to take up where he left off in his quest to help the people of Minden.

'He was never in the hospital, he was never sick, per se - he didn't have time to be sick,' she says.

In 1985, an 11-member watchdog group, Concerned Citizens to Save Fayette County, also formed and pushed for continued EPA soil sampling in Minden.

Lucian Randall, the group's vice president, was one member who has already died from cancer. Randall was a former coal miner who lived next to the Shaffer site. He had collected information on the PCB contamination prior to his death. Another member, Thelma Phillips, has colon cancer and the group's leader, Larry Rose, is alive but in poor health; he's being screened for cancer.

The EPA initially denied the residents' requests for more soil sampling saying that PCBs no longer posed a risk there, according to court documents. It was only after the group petitioned West Virginia and held rallies that attracted protesters from other states did officials agree to retest the site in 1990.

found that even when the company followed protocol, some of the fluid leaked onto the ground at the less than one-acre site. PCBs were also reportedly burned as starter fuel in the company's building that served as both a warehouse and office.

PCBs were commonly used to insulate electrical equipment until 1979, when the EPA banned them as a 'possible' human carcinogen.

Since Shaffer abandoned Minden in 1984, the town has received funding from the EPA's Superfund program, designed to fund the clean-up of the country's most complex or uncontrolled hazardous waste sites.

The EPA's history in Minden began shortly after an unidentified Shaffer employee reportedly notified state officials that PCB oil was stored at the company's site, built on leased land owned by Berwind Land Corporation.

A West Virginia Division of Natural Resources agent notified the federal agency, which sent investigators to the town sometime in November 1984. Investigators found oil from capacitors and transformers stored in containers on the Shaffer site.

When Anna Shaffer, daughter of the company's founder and owner of the namesake site, said she didn't have the money to clean the area and Berwind officials denied responsibility, the EPA sent a team led by Robert Caron. He was later sentenced to three months of home detention for lying to the agency about his education and expertise.

In March 1990, EPA testing validated residents' concerns: soil samples showed PCB contamination at Shaffer and agents found more contaminated barrels buried at the site. This prompted the agency to conduct a



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In March 1990, EPA testing validated residents' concerns: soil samples showed PCB contamination at Shaffer and agents found more contaminated barrels buried at the site, according to court documents. This prompted the agency to conduct a second clean-up effort the following year, with millions of dollars wasted on mismanaging the site. In 1992, the EPA tore down the site and constructed a cap over it.

The same year, the agency sought to recover its costs from Shaffer, now bankrupt, Berwind Land Company, which leased the land to Shaffer, and Johns Hopkins University, though the suit was later thrown out after revelations about an EPA official lying about his credentials.

Dr Amjad charged that the EPA and state health officials have shirked duties to Minden residents and that a government buy-out of properties may be the only solution to save them.

Despite the EPA's efforts to extract and remove contaminated soil on the Shaffer site – they made three attempts between 1984 and 1991 – they ultimately determined a year later that it was best to destroy and construct a cap over the site.

Responding to concerns from Minden residents, the West Virginia Cancer Registry conducted a series of cancer cluster studies in Fayette County from 1979 to 2016, finding a normal-to-expected rate of the disease among residents.

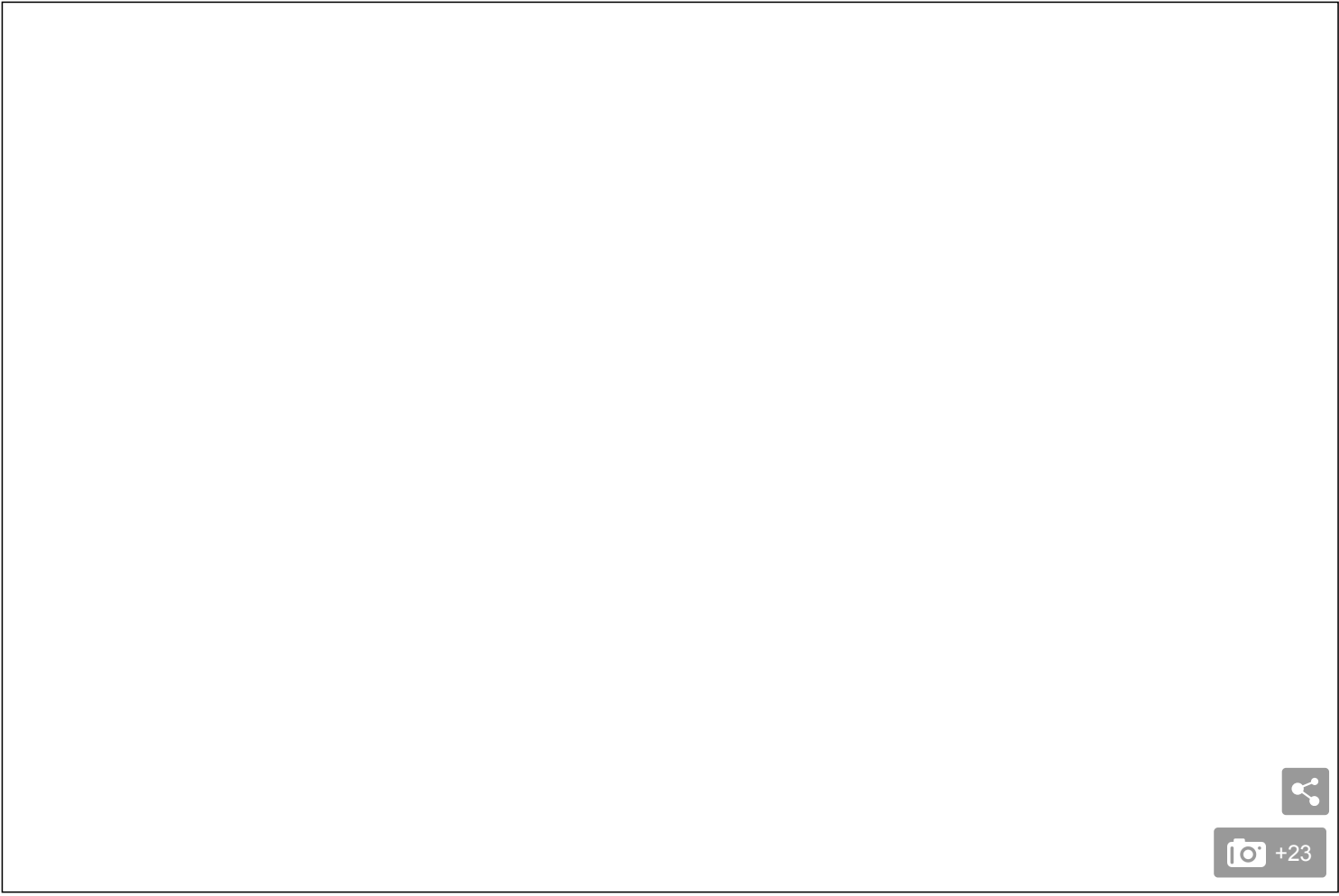
An agency spokesperson wrote in an email to DailyMail.com, after declining multiple requests for a phone interview: 'The West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, Bureau for Public Health will reiterate, there is no current data in the West Virginia Health Statistics Center and West Virginia Cancer Registry to support a cancer cluster in Minden.

'It would be highly inappropriate to unnecessarily alarm residents by misconstruing a limited data set.'

Though the West Virginia Bureau of Public Health stressed that the data does not support a cancer cluster occurring in Minden, emails seen by DailyMail.com suggest that not all agency representatives agree with its findings.

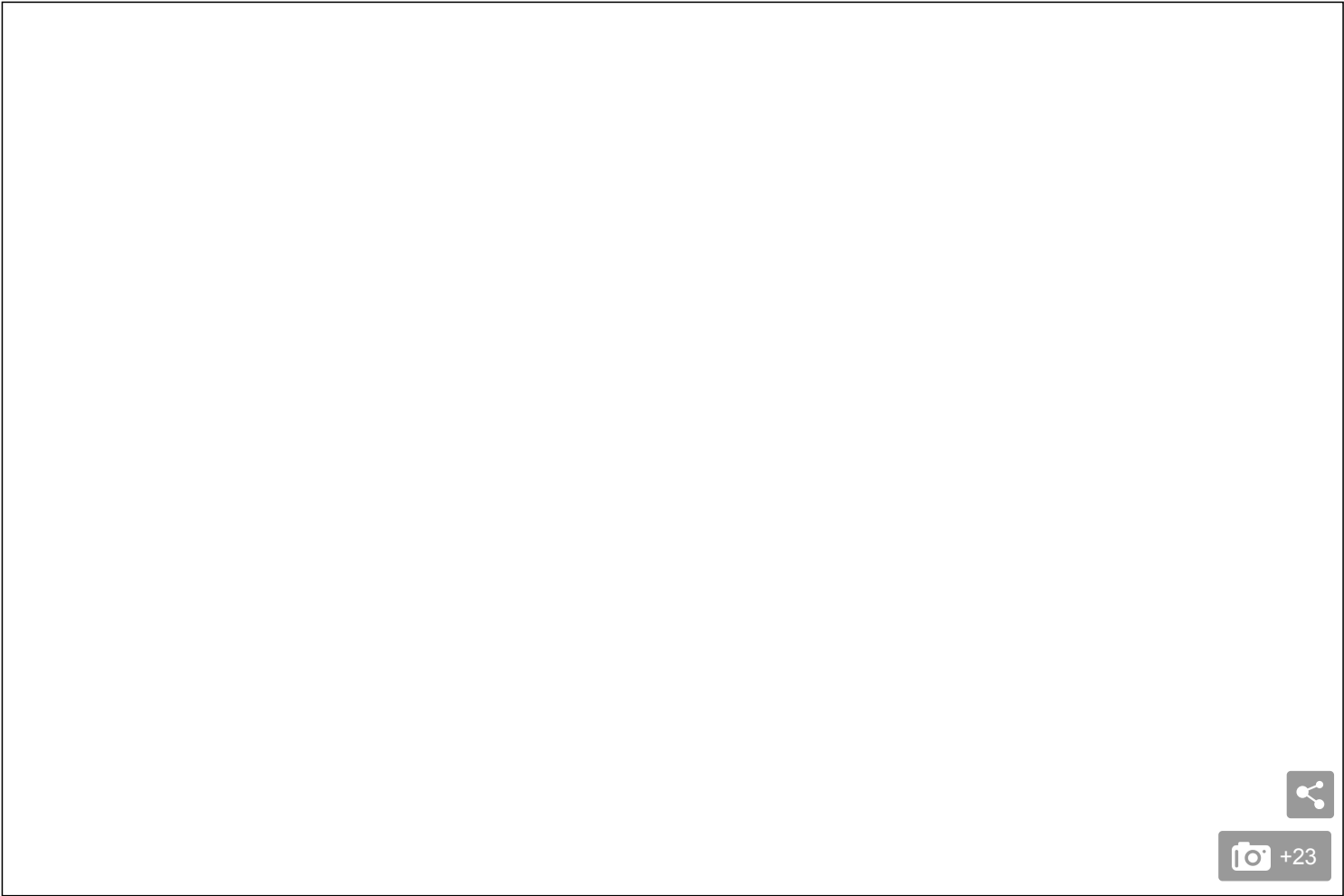
'It does show a much higher cancer death rate than Fayette County in general. It is still small numbers, but given the tiny population the rate is concerning,' an agency statistician wrote in an August 7 email to Dr Amjad.





Darrel 'Butter' Thomas, 58, claims says he's surprised he hasn't experienced any health problems because he played on the Shaffer site as a child





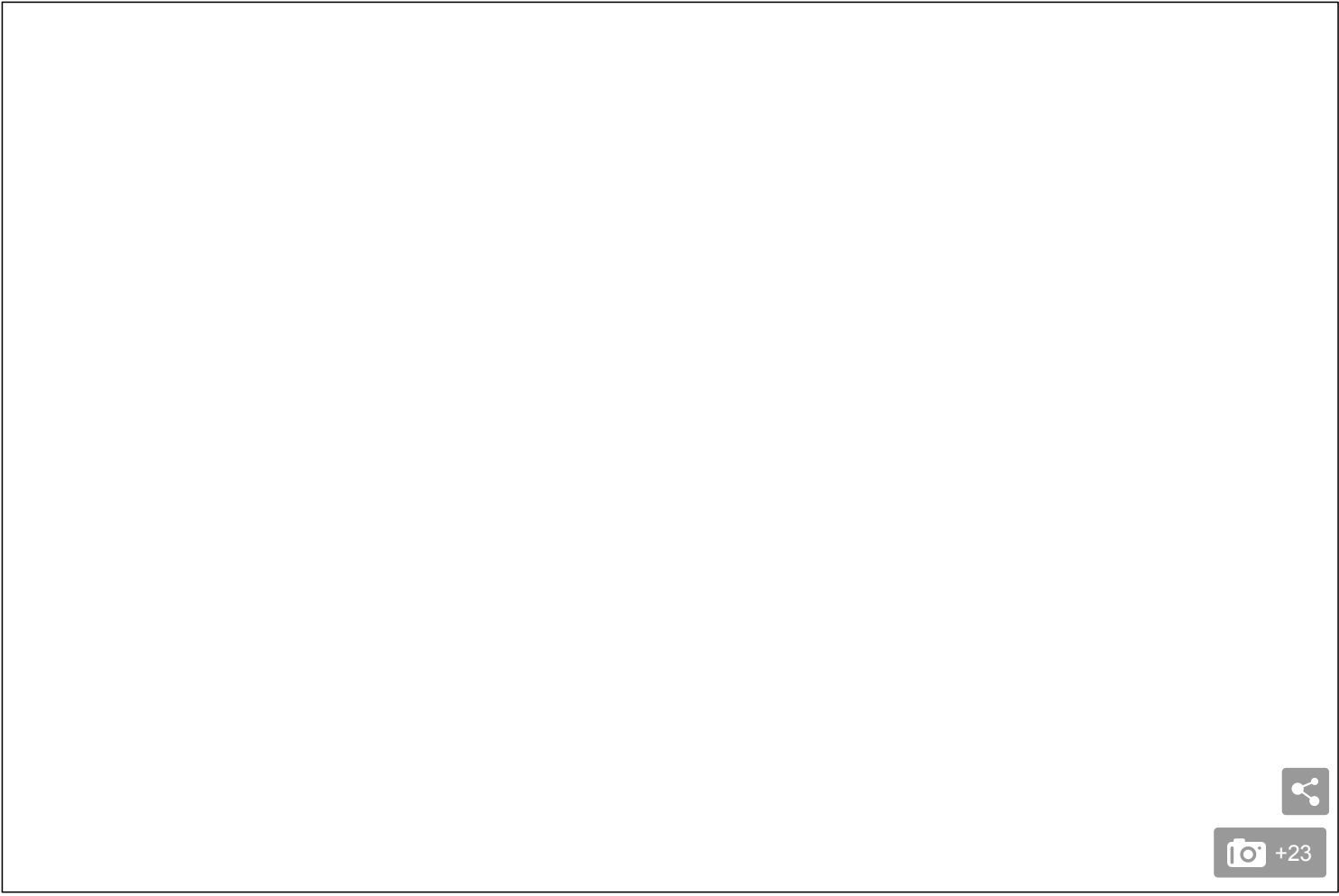
Susie Worley-Jenkins has emerged as the leader of a group of residents demanding residential buyouts from the state, canvassing her neighbors to document cancer rates





Dr Amjad said that, after speaking with cancer patients who live or have lived in Minden and studying their medical records, at least 36 per cent of residents have been diagnosed with a form of cancer





The EPA found that Shaffer had dumped electrical equipment laden with PCB oil on the coal company's now-abandoned mine site in the center of Minden and in the 1980s the town received funding from the EPA's Superfund program, designed to fund the clean-up of the country's most complex or uncontrolled hazardous waste sites

A cancer cluster is hard to prove. It may be a statistical fluke, or sometimes there are other confounding variables like an older population or a higher concentration of smokers. But the state's cancer cluster studies are flawed, Dr Amjad said, since they rely on health information collected from death certificates, which are often inaccurate.

More significantly, Minden has no hospital. As a result, Dr Amjad said, the studies excluded many residents and Shaffer employees who moved away or died in hospitals outside Fayette County.

Many residents have undergone physical examinations, providing blood and urine samples for analysis. Dr Amjad told DailyMail.com he collected and sorted all the information to determine Minden residents have a significantly higher incidence of cancer compared to other towns - possibly 20 times higher in the case of certain cancers.

Ms Worley-Jenkins is one of those residents who's determined not to die in Minden, though she says she and others in the town can't afford to move on her monthly pension of restaurant manager.

'Nobody wants it. It doesn't have value to it,' she said of her one-a has depreciated in value because of the PCB contamination in the

'These people can't replace their homes. They have no money for t They don't even have insurance, half of 'em.'



Since moving to Minden as a child, Ms Worley-Jenkins said that, in addition to her cancer diagnoses, she has suffered a range of skin ailments, including inflamed hair follicles on her head, which doctors could never fully explain. But several years ago, she says Dr Amjad stated that her conditions were the result of exposure to 'toxic substances'.

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She rattles off a list of friends, all residents, diagnosed with or deceased from cancer. One childhood friend has ovarian cancer; another is infertile. Her other friend had skin cancer and is now dying of lung cancer, she says.

'I have to laugh about it or I'll cry,' Ms Worley-Jenkins says.

Dr Amjad urged the EPA 25 years ago to relocate Minden residents because of their exposure to PCBs, but his request fell on deaf ears. The agency returned to the town in June, after residents worried a proposed sewage project could upset the site, to conduct a month-long sampling of 20 locations on county and private properties to test for the chemicals.

The EPA has yet to release the results for Minden - and many residents say they don't trust the agency after their experiences with the EPA in the 1980s and early 1990s, when officials sealed off the about one-acre Shaffer mine site and told residents that it was unlikely the soil was contaminated and that their health wasn't at risk.

Dr Amjad said it's 'impossible' to clean the Shaffer site because the half-life of PCBs is 100 years.

The toxic history of Minden: The once-thriving coal mining town where at least 36% of residents have been diagnosed with a form of cancer

The EPA's history in Minden began shortly after an unidentified Shaffer employee reportedly notified state officials that PCB oil was stored at the company's site, according to court documents from a June 1992 district court case. A West Virginia Division of Natural Resources agent notified the federal agency, which sent investigators to the town sometime in November 1984.

Investigators found oil from capacitors and transformers stored in containers on the Shaffer site. Employees admitted to pouring PCB-laden oil on the dirt roads to combat the dust, according to testimonies submitted during debate over the Superfund Reform Act of 1994.

Long-time Minden resident Darrel 'Butter' Thomas, 58, claims Shaffer employees dumped between 100 and 200 gallons of this oil every other day for around 12 years: 'It was huge.' Mr Thomas says he's surprised he hasn't experienced any health problems because he played on the site as a child.

In fact, many long-time Minden residents have fond memories playing on the site as children. They wonder now why there were no signs warning them of the potential dangers.

