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Tampa Bay Times

A TIMES INVESTIGATION

POISONED

A worker inside Gopher Resource passes through a cloud of dust laced with the neurotoxin lead. The factory recycles 50,000 used car batteries a day. It is the only factory of its kind in Florida.

PHOTO BY A HENRY WOOD (2018)

PART 1: THE FACTORY

Inside Florida's only lead smelter, poisons abound. ■ Cadmium. Arsenic. Sulfur dioxide. ■ But lead is the most prevalent. ■ Dust laced with lead has hung like a dense fog permeating the factory where workers crack open spent car batteries, extract the lead and melt it down in a furnace that runs at around 1,500 degrees. The molten lead is reformed and sold to companies that make new car batteries and other products. ■ Hundreds of workers have been exposed to extreme amounts of the neurotoxin. ■ And the consequences have been profound.

Tampa Bay Times reporters Corey G. Johnson, Rebecca Woodington and Eli Murray spent 18 months investigating Gopher Resource in Tampa.

SPECIAL REPORT INSIDE

2021 RAYS SPECIAL SECTION

PERFECT POSITION

The Rays are set to win now and later, vying for a third straight playoff spot and having baseball's top-ranked farm system.

PLUS: A season schedule, a look back at the unusual 2020 season that took the Rays to the World Series and more.

BIG CHANGES

From virtual job interviews to redefined feasibility, plenty of COVID-19 policies may become the norm, even after the pandemic.

PLUS: The list of Tampa Bay's top 100 places to work, stories about companies on the list and more.

Baker Act: Fix it or tear it up?

Advocates from all angles tug at state's controversial mental health law.

BY JACK SWANE
Times Staff Writer

The Baker Act is one of Florida's most powerful laws — and, critics say, one of its most dysfunctional.

The 30-year-old law allows someone to be held for mental health evaluation and potentially committed to a treatment facility, whether they agree to it or not. But the number of those held involuntarily keeps accelerating, and the fastest-growing age group forced to undergo exams are children.

Now a bipartisan group of legislators and reformers say they've found a way to fix it. They want to expand the Baker Act and make it even more powerful.

Reform bills are now working their way through the Legislature. Expanding the criteria for when the law can be invoked, reformers say, will allow those suffering from serious mental illnesses to be sent directly to treatment centers or hospitals.

They say the existing law allows too many of those people to end up in jail or prison, where housing them costs taxpayer money — funds that could instead be used to improve mental health services.

The biggest problem with Baker, they say, is that it's too vague. ■

FLA. PAYS FOR TOOL IT DOESN'T USE

The state has paid the developer of a COVID tracking app \$4 million. The founder is the son of a donor to President Donald Trump. **Local & State, 1B**

WEALTH, BLACK COMMUNITIES

Two Black residents of St. Petersburg explore the histories of their family and neighborhood's wealth, and the role of civic engagement. **Floridian, 1E**

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71° 83° 83° 76°
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