



Editorial: End childhood lead poisoning

Posted by Grand Rapids Press Editorial Board February 27, 2009 10:50AM

WHY IT MATTERS?

Lead Poisoning has long-term irreversible effects for children.

Lead poisoning can do irreversible damage to a child but is entirely preventable. Still, more than 2,000 Michigan children under age six suffered from the condition, according to a recent report. While the state has seen its numbers decline significantly in recent years, the focus has to be getting to *zero* percent. Even amid these difficult economic times, state legislators and local officials and community groups should look to redouble efforts to prevent children's mental and physical development from being impaired.

The substantial progress already made needs to serve as motivation to do an even better job, not rest on the satisfaction of a job well done. The effects of lead poisoning are numerous, including learning disabilities, anemia, neurological and kidney damage and behavioral problems. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) define blood lead levels at or above 10 micrograms per deciliter as toxic.

The number of Michigan kids with lead poisoning dropped more than 35 percent between 2003 and 2007, despite a rise in testing, according to a January report from Michigan State University and the Department of Community Health (DCH). In 2007, 2,031 children suffered from lead poisoning, down from 2,309 in 2006. The declines can be attributed to the state's Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program (CLPPP). A public awareness campaign and outreach to healthcare providers have been among helpful tools. The initiatives of county health departments and local groups such as the Healthy Homes Coalition of West Michigan have also had an impact.

Grand Rapids is among 14 cities accounting for 79 percent of all cases of poisoning in 2007. Three percent of the city kids tested under age 6 -- or 149 children -- had elevated levels of lead in their blood, down from 208 in 2006.

Grand Rapids recently received a \$4.6 million federal grant for abating lead in homes and education. Nationwide, lead-based paint in homes remains the major source of exposure among children. In 1978, the paint was banned from home use.

Babies and children under age 6 are at the greatest risk for lead poisoning because they put their hands and other objects in their mouth, increasing their chances of ingesting lead dust and paint chips.

The Healthy Homes Coalition held a meeting Tuesday with Grand Rapids City Commissioners, neighborhood association leaders, landlords and other community stakeholders about additional efforts to alleviate the problem. That's the kind of dialogue that should be occurring statewide.

Gov. Jennifer Granholm and lawmakers should boost funding for lead abatement. Funding allocated for CLPPP and DCH has totaled \$4.8 million in recent years, the majority from federal dollars, according to the Senate Fiscal Agency.

A 2007 report by the Michigan Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention and Control Commission said adequate funding was necessary to continue progress. "Resources spent to prevent lead poisoning are an investment in each child's life-long health, quality of life, learning and earning potential," the commission said in pointing out the clear costs and benefits. Several of the recommendations are worthy of a second look.

The state may not reach the CDC's goal of eliminating childhood poisoning by 2010 but it certainly isn't that far away. Look at the progress made. A serious, sustained commitment is necessary from everyone able to make a difference.

E-mail a letter to the editor for publication online and in print: pulse@grpress.com Please keep letters to less than 200 words and include your full name, home address and phone number.

© 2009 Michigan Live. All Rights Reserved.