

[Leaded example](#)

Tuesday, June 22, 2010



[ShareThis](#)



Crews work to remove lead from a Grand Rapids home and paint over the surfaces. Strict new federal rules govern how lead must be handled in a rehabilitation project.

PHOTOS: JEFF HAGE

GR addresses triple bottom line by investing in lead abatement

By Joe Boomgaard | TBL
jboomgaard@mibiz.com

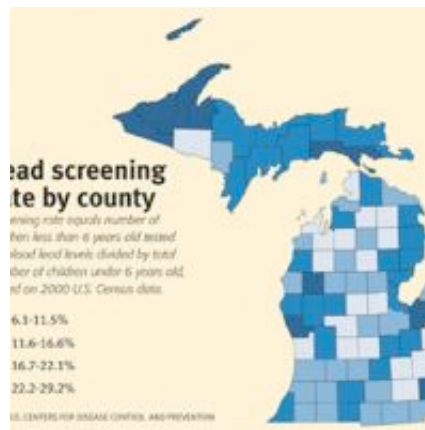
GRAND RAPIDS — In the early 2000s, testing revealed that about 40 percent of children living in Grand Rapids' Baxter neighborhood who were tested for lead levels were being poisoned by their homes — eight times the state average. Because of a range of socio-economic challenges for those families, there wasn't much being done to help save the more than 5,000 children from an absolutely preventable problem.

Initially, the issue was looked at as a health problem, especially since many health insurance plans don't cover lead poisoning and the parents of those children were the least able to afford treatment, let alone removing the cause of the problem — lead-based paints in their homes.

Photo Gallery

Click on the gallery images to view full-size photo.

So a city department applied for federal grant funding for home rehabilitation and failed. That failure helped the people



involved in the efforts to realize they were being very short-sighted and come up with a more holistic approach.

According to the Healthy Homes Coalition of West Michigan, about 90 percent of all childhood lead poisoning cases in Kent County can be traced to lead-based paint and lead dust found in and near homes. More than 85 percent of homes in Grand Rapids were built before 1978 — the year lead-based paint was banned, the coalition estimates.

“It’s an urban environment issue for kids,” Paul Haan, executive director of the Healthy Homes Coalition of West Michigan, told TBL. “Lead poisoning causes brain damage, and that causes problems for life. People paid for that by increased special education, social costs and (juvenile courts). People (were



paying) for the disability a person gets as a result of lead poisoning, which impacts the wage they can earn and their ability to keep a job. The health costs were the least of it. And when you multiply that by more than 5,000 kids in 2001, those are astronomical costs. ... From birth to age 2, kids are overwhelmingly at risk. Prevention is really key.”

What’s more, Haan

said a map of the most affected neighborhoods revealed a troubling trend.

“It was a bull’s eye over certain neighborhoods, places where people could least afford this, mostly with people of color,” he said. “People said this wasn’t right. The social injustice was right there. That’s what really got it going.”

Building bridges

So the city assembled a coalition of about two-dozen organizations ranging in scope from environmental groups to businesses, from landlords to children’s advocates, from for-profits to nonprofits, and attacked the problem from a community development standpoint, said Connie Bohatch, managing director of the city’s Community Development Department.

“We still have a housing stock where there are issues about it not being maintained, where (lead)’s an issue,” Bohatch told TBL. “It comes down to economics and your ability to have housing choices. Folks with low income do not have as many options of where to live. If you can afford something of a higher quality, you’d choose that. They get into substandard housing because they don’t have a choice.”

The resulting Get The Lead Out campaign has been successful in bringing in more than \$13.5 million through five grants for lead hazard control in targeted city neighborhoods, mostly the older neighborhoods with a high rate of poverty.

The program officially launched in January 2004 and has been successful in removing lead from approximately 900 homes in Grand Rapids — homes in which people had children and met income requirements, or homes with low-income children owned by landlords.

“What’s really important for people to understand is that housing is a critical piece of infrastructure for a city,” Bohatch said. “When people think of infrastructure, they think of sewers and streets and engineering terms. But for a healthy, vibrant community, well-maintained, safe, affordable housing is an important part of the city’s infrastructure.”

Owner occupied homeowners are eligible for a no-interest loan of up to \$12,000, between 30-70 percent of which may be forgiven, based on income. If a lead-poisoned child is in the home, all repairs are made for free.

Opportunity to help, and find work

Moreover, those funds act as a direct stimulus to the contractors and builders certified to do lead work, Haan said. “There’s a job opportunity here. It creates opportunity to protect the children.”

His organization, Healthy Homes Coalition of West Michigan, is tasked with promotion and coordination of the campaign, as well as helping get families onboard. The group also provides families with other educational programming to minimize other risks in the home, whether from poor wiring, mold and so on.

But because the federal grants require the groups to use as many local firms as possible in the lead abatement work, it can also use some of its allocation to provide training to workers that are interested in becoming certified.

At one point, the city received about \$3 million per year from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to use for the lead program, but that funding is down to about \$1.8 million in a highly competitive arena. Plus, with much of the low-hanging fruit already addressed, the next steps can be even more costly.

“What we’re seeing is a changing model of how this funding works,” Bohatch said. “Our partnership with Healthy Homes will help us secure some more funds because we are looking at more than just lead. We’re looking at all things that affect people. We’re looking more holistically.”

Rental properties get boost



Clay Powell, director of the Rental Property Owners Association of Kent County, said landlords had some initial concerns about getting involved with Get The Lead Out. For starters, the house had to be built prior to 1978 and income-eligible children had to live in the unit or if it was vacant, the property had to be adequate for children to live in. Plus, landlords or their maintenance staff must attend free “Lead Safe Work Practices” training.

Landlords of qualifying properties are able to get up to \$8,000 per unit, but in return, they would have a self-amortizing lien placed on the property for three years and they had to agree to keep rent at fair market rates while marketing the property to families with children. And owners are always wary of increased documentation requirements, which were minimal in the case of this campaign, he said.

“For the most part, these are initial perception problems as they are not thoroughly understood,” Powell told TBL. “Once a property owner is shown that there is a very slim chance that a lien will not be removed or that the dictated rents will be contrary to current market rates, they generally feel more comfortable with the

program.”

The rent requirements nearly match those already being offered by the landlords, he added.

Perhaps the best driver for the program from the landlords’ perspectives is that it helps reduce their risk and at the same time improve the property, even driving up values over time. Given the current economic climate, rental property owners have a hard time obtaining rehabilitation loans and the Get The Lead Out campaign offers them one source of financing.

“Proactively addressing the problems of lead-based paint through remediation and abatement demonstrates the owner’s commitment to providing a safe and healthy environment and lessens the risk of exposure to costly litigation,” Powell stated. “Those participating in the program have reported that they experience shorter vacancies, less tenant turnover and longer tenancies — all very good things in a high vacancy rental market. ... Improvements to the property may increase the marketability of the property and return on investment.”

Model of sustainability



Grand Rapids Mayor George Heartwell cites the Get The Lead Out campaign as an important demonstration of the city’s commitment to sustainability and in forging key public-private partnerships to achieve those goals.

“It’s a social indicator, but it’s also an environmental hazard — a toxic chemical in the environment — and the economic impacts are significant,” Heartwell told TBL in an interview about the city winning an award naming it the most sustainable mid-sized city in the U.S. “Children are affected by lead at an early age, and their neurological development is impeded. By the time they’re getting to school, they’re already behind. You can’t undo the damage to their brains.” Powell agreed. He said the city identified a problem that was very costly to tackle in the long term and developed a solution with the RPOA and other partners to invest now and avoid those issues as much as possible.

“The city worked hand-in-hand with the RPOA to design a program that would work for rental property owners and enable the largest pool of eligible properties to be made lead safe,” Powell stated. “The program is a great example of a successful public-private partnership to address a larger community need that impacts all of us in some way.” tbl

Tags: [grand rapids](#) [lead](#) [sustainability](#) [tbl](#)