



# The Times

## Addressing the lead problem

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Taking a cue from the federal Centers for Disease Control and its own urban areas, New Jersey is moving forward with tougher standards on lead poisoning for the better protection of the state's children.

The state Department of Health and Senior Services has proposed reducing the blood-lead "level of concern" in children from 20 micrograms of lead per deciliter of whole blood to 15. It would further reduce the threshold to as low as 10 when a child has two test results between 10 and 14. At that point, a nurse with the local health department would be assigned to help find the source of the lead exposure, mitigate the hazard and assist in finding treatment.

While the state considers stricter standards, Trenton has already established them. For more than a year, the city has had a 15-microgram limit in place -- with good reason. At least half of Trenton's housing stock may harbor elevated levels of lead. Since lead paint was banned -- by New Jersey in 1971 and by federal law in 1978 -- much has been done to remove dangerous levels of lead. Much still remains to be done, however, when lead is as near as a window sill, a drink of water from contaminated pipes or even the city's soil, a vestige of its industrial past.

As detailed in a 2008 Times of Trenton investigation, the effect of lead poisoning can be heartbreaking. It is stealthy and surreptitious, preying particularly on the very young. Moreover, it is often misdiagnosed. Once a toxic level of lead is ingested, it can result in permanent learning and behavioral problems, seizures, coma and death. Treatment is available, but there is no cure.

The acceptable level of lead in a child's bloodstream should be 0. While that standard of zero tolerance may never be achieved, we're heartened by the state's move to come closer to the ideal. And we urge Trenton to continue its vigilance against the dangers of lead. We also suggest the city assist the nonprofit community and environmental group Isles Inc. in its continuing effort to test dust samples in houses where lead is likely to lurk.

Once lead sources are identified, the process for removing it must be streamlined and made more affordable for those families most affected by it. Regulations proposed by the Department of Community Affairs that would make it easier for homeowners to access grants and loans to clean up lead-contaminated homes seem like a good way to help that happen.

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