LEAD

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to see the state moving toward stricter blood-lead standards, she added that it still wasn't enough to keep kids safe from the debilitating hazards of lead poisoning.

A growing body of scientific evidence indicates that exposure to even miniscule amounts of lead, amounts that would lead to blood-lead levels lower than even what the revised standards provide for, can lead to brain damage and neurological impairment in children.

"You have to say this is better than it was," she said. "Certainly 20 was so terribly outdated from what the research said, but the research has moved beyond this. Now science tells us that the worst damage happens between the levels of five and 10."

"The CDC, since 1991, has considered 10 micrograms to be their 'level of concern' but the scientific literature clearly shows that there are significant negative outcomes with levels as low as 5 micrograms, and perhaps even lower," said Jay Schneider, a professor of pathology, anatomy and cell biology at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia.

The CDC has not changed its own acceptable blood-lead levels since 1991.

"What the data shows is that the greatest loss of IQ and the great effects on cognitive development are as you go from one to 10 micrograms per deciliter, and then there were smaller incremental effects as you go every 10 micrograms per deciliter above that," he added.

He added that in higher concentrations, lead poisoning led to problems with language development, attention and behavior, but that in lower levels the problems would be hard to notice on the surface.

"We've found that at very low concentrations, a fraction of what the CDC considers the level of concern, (lead has a) tremendous effect on a wide variety of physiological processes in the central nervous system," he said.

"It might not be something that you notice (behaviorally), but that damage could make a huge difference in terms of whether you're successful in the world or not," Pivnick added.

According to Pivnick, Trenton – indeed many of the urban centers in New Jersey – is particularly at risk for lead due to its older buildings. Lead paint was outlawed in New Jersey in 1971 and a federal lead ban went into effect in 1978.

"It's because of our housing stock," Lewis-Spruill said. As of last December, up to 50 percent of the city's 33,000 homes could harbor elevated levels of lead.

And while the city does not currently sponsor dust sampling in homes, Isles has a dedicated division set up to conduct lead dust samples in houses across the city. According to Prince Moore, a coordinator for lead testing at Isles, the organization has conducted windowsill and floor dust samples for more than 1,300 homes in the last several years.

Pivnick said that data for the homes shows that a majority of the homes have an elevated level of lead. "If you follow the standards set by the National Center for Healthy Housing (a private non-profit that specializes, in part, in mitigating lead hazards), over 60 percent of the homes are coming back with dangerous levels of lead in the dust."

For now, though, DHSS says the new steps – which would go into effect with approval from the state's Public Health Council – are a potent step toward reducing the risk lead poses to New Jersey's children.

"This is a major step forward for New Jersey," Riley said. "It sets a standard that will protect thousands more children and families."

"I think it's to their credit that they've lowered their threshold of involvement," Pivnick added. "But overall I would like to see a dust sample at the time of housing turnover so the occupant would know what they are about to move into. Even though there's not a whole lot of funds to respond, it's better for people to know than not know."

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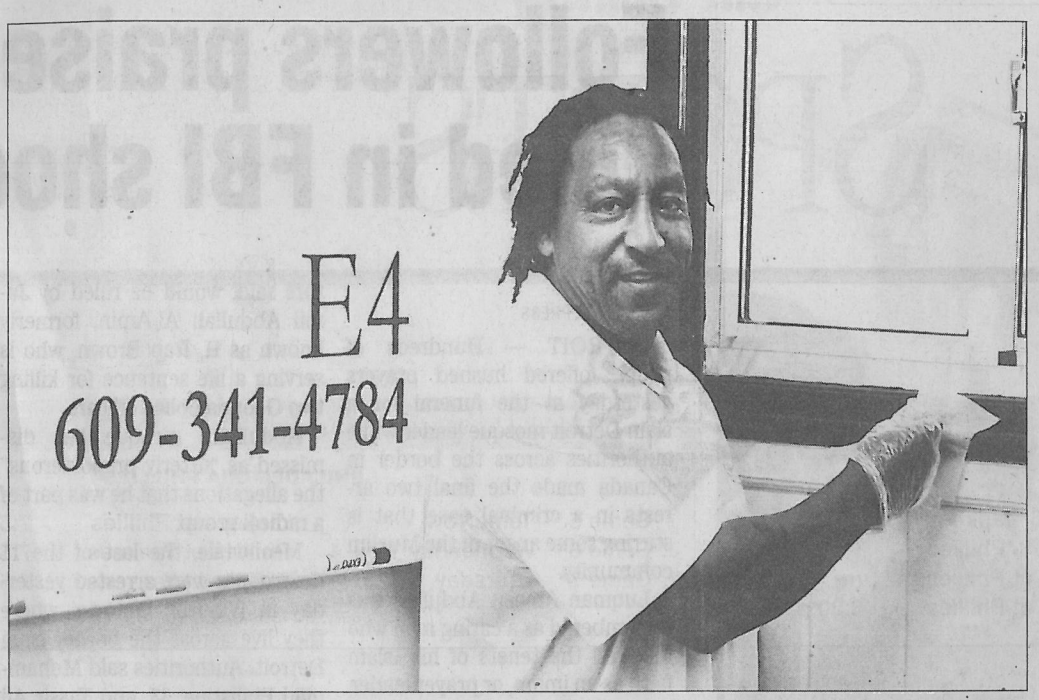

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Prince Moore, coordinator for lead testing at Isles Inc., demonstrates how to test for lead in paint on a window at the group's offices in Trenton.