

Frequently Asked Questions about Childhood Lead Poisoning

The Challenge of Lead Poisoning

Q: How many children in NJ are affected by Lead?

Each year, more than 3,000 children in New Jersey are poisoned due to lead exposure.

About 225,000 young kids in New Jersey have been poisoned by lead since 2000. For example, in the 2012-13 school year, 20% of the children entering Irvington Township public school kindergarten class, 15% of Trenton kindergarteners, and 11% of New Brunswick kindergarteners had levels above the national lead reference level of 5 mg/dl.

Children with this amount of lead in their blood are 30% more likely to fail 3rd grade reading and math tests. Lead-poisoned children are seven times more likely to drop out of school and six times more likely to become involved in the juvenile justice system.

Q: We've all heard about the problems with lead in Flint. How does NJ compare to Flint?

It's important to remember that water is not the only way children are lead poisoned.

In NJ, the primary source of lead poisoning is chipping and peeling lead paint applied many years ago in poorly maintained housing. In 2014, testing found that 11 New Jersey cities and two counties had more children with elevated blood lead levels (EBLL) than Flint, MI to date. Over 3,000 NJ children were identified as having EBLLs for the first time in 2015.

While the pictures of dirty Flint water makes for good TV visuals, the silent march of lead dust into the bloodstreams and brains of young children has done, and will continue to do, far more harm to many more children long after the Flint "crisis" has been forgotten. The data about NJ lead levels are not in competition with Flint, but they highlight the tragically neglected lead poisoning story of the tens of thousands of children, who are mostly lower income and black, living in Trenton, Chicago, Detroit, Providence, and many other American cities. Their futures are blighted by their exposure to lead in contaminated deteriorating houses, plumbing, and soil.

Q: What are the affects of lead exposure in children?

*Lead is well known to cause **permanent** neurological damage in children.*

It lowers IQ levels, negatively affects academic performance, and increases all types of learning disabilities. Lead poisoning, even at very low levels, impairs the development of those parts of the brain that regulate behavior and mood, and is associated with attention deficit disorder, impulsiveness, aggression, and higher rates of criminal behavior. Lead is so toxic that it is unsafe at any level.

According to Dr. Peter Simon, the former medical director of the Division of Community, Family Health, and Equity at the Rhode Island Department of Health, "Lead poisoning is a significant

part as to why children with a lower income status do poorly in school and are more likely to get in trouble with the law.”

Q: Didn't we already solve the problem of lead in the environment?

No.

In the U.S., the removal of lead from paint in 1978, and the final phase-out of lead in gasoline by 1986, resulted in a dramatic reduction in blood lead levels of children. **As lead began to leave the environment, IQ increased and violent crimes in the general population went down.** Numerous studies link the removal of lead in paint and gasoline to up to 90% of the reduction of violent crimes in the 1990s and increases in IQ of 5-7 points.

However, the issue of lead is prevalent in the environment in older housing stock, plumbing and soil. Out of the 2,000 homes Isles tested in Trenton, more than 60% had enough lead present to affect a child's IQ.

Q: Yes, but what will it cost to remove lead from housing and what are the benefits?

The cost to remediate lead hazards in housing averages between \$5,000-\$12,000 per unit. The cost not to remediate is \$32,000 per year per child.

If you care about state and local budget deficits, education disparities between white and minority children, the cost of crime and delinquency or special education, then you should care about finding ways to remove lead from homes.

The widespread reduction in lead poisoned children is expected to reduce school discipline problems, enrollment in special education classes, crime, and prison populations. Researchers claim that anywhere **between \$17 and \$50 could be saved in taxes for each dollar spent** on lead safe repairs.

"There are very few public health interventions that offer that great combination of short-term benefits that are measurable, as well as long-term gains," says Professor Matthew Davis, who serves as chief medical executive for the State of Michigan. "Lead abatement is one."

The NJ Department of the Public Advocate estimates future savings from avoiding lead exposures to be \$32,000 per child per year and \$27 billion statewide. Getting lead out of our environment appeals to both fiscal conservatives and liberals alike.

The Lead Hazard Control Assistance Fund

Q: What is the Lead Hazard Control Assistance Fund (LHCAF)?

To address the issue of housing-based lead poisoning, in 2004, the State of New Jersey introduced the Lead Hazard Control Assistance Fund (LHCAF). This fund was created to allocate resources to remove lead from older houses and apartments by offering deferred payment loans or grants to property owners.

Funding for the LHCAF comes from a 50 cent/gallon user fee collected from the retail sale of paint. With the restoration of this fund, New Jersey residents and landlords who serve low-income households shall once again have access to the funds to pay for lead safe repairs of their homes.

The Lead Hazard Control Assistance Fund spent \$16.5 million removing lead from older homes and apartments. It also financed home inspections, emergency relocations for affected families, and efforts to educate the public about the risks of living in homes built before lead-based paints were banned in 1978.

This fund was targeted to prevent the lead exposure which remains in New Jersey's poorest cities, disproportionately affecting low-income, minority children.

Unfortunately, by 2014, no funds were appropriated to the LHCAF, eliminating a significant resource for families and property owners trying to address lead hazards. **Since 2004, about \$53.7 million earmarked for the Lead Hazard Control Assistance Fund, as required by law, was diverted to the state's general treasury to balance the budget and provide risky and unproven tax breaks to business.**

The NJ Assembly and Senate have passed bills in each of the last 3 years to restore at least \$10 million to the LHCAF. Each year, Governor Christie has effectively vetoed the legislation.

ACTION: Governor Christie has the ability to restore at least \$10 million to the Department of Community Affairs for a Lead Hazard Control Assistance Fund by including the LHCAF in his 2016 budget. Governor Christie must put the safety of children ahead of political concerns by including \$10 million for the LHCAF in his budget.

Q: Why should my tax dollars be used to clean up lead?

In this case they're not!

The revenue source for the Lead Hazard Control Assistance Fund comes from a 50 cent per gallon user fee on paint sold in NJ. The paint industry knew for decades that the lead-based paint they were selling consumers was potentially toxic for children. Some would argue that the paint industry should be held more liable to pay for the cleanup of the lead hazard that they facilitated nationwide. However, a user fee seems like a reasonable and non-burdensome compromise for paying the cost of lead repairs.

Financially, cleaning up lead paint hazards for your fellow citizens make enormous fiscal sense. The choice is between paying \$5,000-\$12,000 per unit to make a house lead safe, or \$32,000 per year for each child who is poisoned by lead paint. These costs are embedded in the cost of crime/criminal justice, delinquency, special education, and lost tax revenues.

Q: Why don't landlords and homeowners take care of lead themselves?

Landlords are required by law before signing or renewing a lease or rental agreement, to disclose any *known* lead-based paint or hazards on the property. However, in low income neighborhoods there are many landlords who are more than willing to 1) not *know* about a lead

hazard, or 2) ignore the law. For rental units of more than 3, there is an inspection requirement for lead testing and clearance. This is not the case for 1-2 unit rentals. In a perfect world, an inspection requirement process would find lead and then hold landlords accountable. However, most, older, cities do not have the number of inspectors nor the resources necessary to pursue landlords who are in violation of the law.

Low-income homeowners have three issues:

1. Often, they are not aware of the hazards of lead based paint
2. In addition, they are not aware that their home might have lead issues.
3. Finally, low/moderate income homeowners do not have the resources to manage the cost of repairing the source of lead dust or for remediation of lead based surfaces.

Surprisingly, many times the cause of lead intrusion comes from damaged roofing, gutters, siding, or windows which create moisture issues. In turn, moisture causes damage to paint and wall board, releasing lead paint and dust into the home. The cost of repairing these issues is usually fairly large and exceeds the ability of lower income homeowners to address them. A streamlined grant or loan program, such as the LHCAF, would easily and cost-effectively alleviate those issues.

Q: I've heard that the LHCAF wasn't very effective, why would it be better this time?

While much good was done with the original LHCAF, clearly the money could have been more effectively used to help landlords and low income families get relief from lead hazards. Much has been learned about effective state sponsored primary prevention programs over the last few years. In addition, by restarting the LHCAF at this moment, organizations and municipalities who have had experience in making homes lead safe, can be advocates for new rule making/policies that would enable money (in the form of streamlined loans or grants) to more quickly be available to communities and transform the LHCAF into a successful tool for lead safety.

Q: Have other states been effective in lowering childhood lead poisoning?

The most effective methods are the promotion of **housing-based primary prevention policies**—laws that aim to identify and fix lead hazards before children become poisoned. Several states, notably Maryland, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and the District of Columbia, have housing-based primary prevention laws. In addition, laws and enforcement of lead inspection for ALL rental housing is proven to reduce lead poisoning in children.

Isles' Experience

Founded in 1981, Isles, Inc. is a community development and environmental organization based in Trenton, New Jersey. With a mission to foster self-reliant families and healthy, sustainable communities, we design and develop effective services that support this mission and share what we learn with others who can make a difference.

Since 1999, Isles has been engaged in environmental health and policy work from many angles. In our role as a leader in environmental health, Isles has:

- Tested more than 2,000 homes for hazardous lead levels.
- Created the nationally-recognized ReHEET service that combines lead safe, energy efficiency and healthy homes retrofits as one “case.” We have provided retrofits to more than 170 Trenton homes over the past 4 years.
- Established the NJ Healthy Homes Training Center, one of 17 satellite training centers of the National Center for Healthy Homes, to train community health workers, social workers, building inspectors, etc.). We have trained or been responsible for training more than 800 home- or child services related professionals.
- Trained multiple teams of peer educators to visit homes and identify environmental asthma triggers and conduct sampling for lead.
- Compiled data for an environmental health profile of Trenton with comparisons to county and state data.
- Completed a survey in partnership with Rutgers Eagleton Institute to better understand Trenton residents' knowledge, attitudes and practices related to the home environment.
- Created a tablet-based healthy homes assessment that links to a master data base, enabling us to characterize the housing of Trenton's low income housing.