
Prevention is key to combating lead poisoning, expert says



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TRENTON — The crisis in Flint, Michigan — **and more recently, Newark** — has cast new attention on lead in water supplies, but high lead levels in children is an old problem that continues to persist in cities across the state and nation.

Elyse Pivnick, who has been working on lead-prevention efforts for the past 15 years, said Wednesday that children in inner cities are especially vulnerable because they often live in old, badly maintained housing where lead-based paint is a leading culprit.



N.J. cities with the most lead-affected kids

The focus, she said, needs to shift from treatment to prevention.

"We use children as lead detectors," she said during a webinar hosted by Isles, a community development organization based in Trenton. "We wait for them to have levels of 5 or more micrograms per deciliter, 10 or 15 and at that point, we go into the house to see what sources of lead there are and remove the hazardous conditions.

"It's a little too late," she continued. "You're closing the barn door after all the animals have gotten out. We want to focus on prevention."

Lead residue in soil and dust, from old lead-based paint and other products, continues to be a major problem, said Pivnick, the director of environmental health at Isles.

There is no safe level of lead in children's blood, but she recommended that **the state lower its threshold for lead exposure** from 10 micrograms per deciliter to 5.

"By going down from 10 to 5, you're doubling or tripling the number of children who are in need of help or intervention, but we see that as excellent," she said. "The sooner we can get to those children, the better."



Should all N.J. schools be required to test water for lead?

State health statistics from 2014, the most recent year for which data is available, show that children in 11 cities and two counties had a higher percentage of children with elevated lead levels than Flint did in 2015.

Last year, more than 3,000 new cases of children under the age of 6 in New Jersey with elevated levels of lead in their blood were reported and since 2000, about 225,000 children have been afflicted by lead.

"Let's have the same attention and sense of alarm for our New Jersey children as is being given to Flint children," Pivnick said.

Lead poisoning, she said, increases the risk of lowered IQs, learning disabilities and behavioral problems that can lead to crime later on.

The cost to make a house lead-safe can range from \$5,000 to \$12,000, but the social and economic costs associated with children who are poisoned by lead can be as high as \$32,000 per year.

"We would never say that lead is the only reason these children are having problems," Pivnick said. "It's a multifaceted problem as to why kids fail ... but you can make a home lead-safe once and with a little bit of maintenance, it can stay as a constant in that family's life. It's something that we know how to do and it makes sense for public resources to be dedicated to that."

She said efforts that can be done on the local, state and federal levels to prevent lead poisoning.

Among her recommendations would be to:

- Map the data that is available so people can see at a glance where the high-risk areas are;
- Require landlords to obtain lead-safe certificates before they rent the unit;
- Make sure inspections are done at the time of sale or rental;
- Allow tenants to get inspections on demand as opposed to relying on landlords;
- Require that sellers disclose known information on lead hazards before selling a house;
- Require that housing inspectors be trained in the "Seven Principles of Healthy Homes;"
- Test drinking water and playgrounds statewide
- Create local advisory groups to better coordinate efforts; and
- Educate residents and train other community-based organizations

Pivnick also said that state and federal funding also needs to be restored, including **\$10 million for the Lead Hazard Control Assistance Fund**. Money collected under a 50-cent tax on every gallon of paint sold has for years been diverted to the state's operating budget, but instead could help pay for lead abatement projects, relocating families whose children have high lead levels in their blood and creating a web-based housing registry.

"This is an old problem that fell off the radar," Pivnick said. "There's a lot of families who are not aware of lead poisoning as an issue at all. ... We want to see widespread lead testing of homes and children."

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