

Why 11 N.J. cities have more lead-affected kids than Flint, Michigan



Elyse Pivnick, director of environmental health for Isles Inc., speaks at a Trenton press conference calling for more attention to New Jersey's lead problem. At left is Staci Berger, president of the Community Development Network of New Jersey and at right is state Sen. Shirley Turner (D-Mercer). (Courtesy of Isles Inc.)



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TRENTON — Eleven cities in New Jersey, and two counties, have a higher proportion of young children with dangerous lead levels than Flint, Mich., does, according to New Jersey and Michigan statistics cited by a community advocacy group.

With the eyes of the nation focused on the brain damage and other problems associated with [lead-contaminated water in Flint](#), several community advocacy organizations in New Jersey banded together this week to draw attention to New Jersey's lead problem, asking for a renewed focus on solving it.

In New Jersey, children 6 years of age and younger have continued to ingest lead from paint in windows, doors and other woodwork found in older homes, particularly in older, poorer cities, said Elyse Pivnick, director of environmental health for Isles, Inc., a community development organization based in Trenton.

"In light of the Flint debacle, we wanted people to understand that water is not the only thing that's poisoning children," she said. "Most people think the lead problem was solved when we took lead out of gasoline and new homes in the 1970s, but that's not true."

The communities with the high lead levels include Irvington, East Orange, Trenton, Newark, Paterson, Plainfield, [Jersey City](#), Elizabeth, Atlantic City, New Brunswick and Passaic, along with Salem and Cumberland counties.

"You can breathe it in from dust and you can swallow it," Pivnick said.



Christie vetoes \$10M fund to remove lead paint

New Jersey Department of Health statistics from 2014, the last year for which data is available, show that those 11 cities and two counties had a higher percentage of children with elevated lead levels than Flint did in 2015, as shown by Michigan state statistics.

Also, Pivnick pointed out, in 2015, there were more than 3,000 new cases of children under the age of 6 in New Jersey with elevated levels of lead in their blood. Overall, advocates said, about 225,000 young children in the state have been afflicted by lead since 2000.

At a Trenton press conference on Monday, Isles Inc. and several other community action groups called on Gov. Chris Christie to restore \$10 million in funding for the Lead Hazard Control Assistance Fund in the next state budget.

That money had been earmarked for the removal of lead from older homes, and also financed home inspections, emergency relocations for affected families and efforts to educate the public.

Just two weeks ago, Christie pocket-vetoed a \$10 million bill that set aside money for the lead control assistance fund. This was the third consecutive two-year legislative session in which the bill failed to be signed into law.

The \$10 million is money accrued based on a fee on paint sales, but governors have diverted the funds' revenue to support the state budget since the fund was established in 2004, according to the bill's supporters.

In addition to more state funding, Pivnick and the other advocates called for more involvement by local communities and leaders in focusing on the lead problem, including enforcing housing codes more diligently and expanding inspections to rental units with fewer than three bedrooms.

Lead poisoning leads to brain damage and the associated memory loss and related learning disabilities, and it "robs children of their potential," Pivnick said.

With the problem even more widespread in New Jersey than it is in Flint, Pivnick said, "We should have the same protocols in place that Flint does. Why aren't the same alarms going off here?"

Sen. Ronald Rice (D-Essex) agreed, "We've seen the national outrage resulting from lead-contaminated water distributed in Flint. We have our own crisis in New Jersey that cannot be ignored."

Other groups joining the campaign included the Housing and Community Development Network of New Jersey; New Jersey Citizen Action and the Anti-Poverty Network of New Jersey.

Responding for the state, Donna Leusner, a spokeswoman for the Department of Health, did not refute the statistics circulated by the advocacy groups, but pointed out that they are based on a "lower standard" for lead levels in blood than is currently in state regulations.

Over the past 20 years, Leusner said, the trend in the number of children with elevated lead levels has fallen significantly, while the number of children tested has increased significantly.

In the last fiscal year, she said, 205,607 children were tested for lead, compared with 10,200 in 1998. Also, she said, the number of children with elevated blood levels, based on the higher standard, dropped over the same period.

"The facts are that in New Jersey, childhood lead poisoning is a public health success story," she said. She pointed out that New Jersey is one of just 17 states that have universal testing for children ages 1 and 2.

She pointed out that the Flint statistics were based on 2015, but a leading pediatrician there projected that the number of Flint children under 6 with elevated blood lead levels will reach 8,000 in 2016.

By comparison, she said, New Jersey's official statistics, based on its current standard, show 885 reported cases of elevated blood lead levels in children under 6 for 2015.

Tammori Petty, a spokeswoman for the Department of Community Affairs, added, "New Jersey is out ahead of the majority of states in that we continue to regularly and systematically inspect multi-family housing for lead-based paint hazards."

Leusner said the health department "has no idea if data regarding Flint that advocates are citing is accurate or is being fully explained, particularly in comparison to other regions in the nation."

Pivnick acknowledged that New Jersey is hardly the only state with a lead paint problem, but said the groups' main purpose was to get more state funding to help solve the problem.

She said her group used the 5 mg/dL standard because it's what the federal Centers for Disease Control uses. New Jersey uses a standard of 10 mg/dL (micrograms per deciliter).

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