

City's new lead law shows positive results



ANNETTE LEIN staff photographer

George Herndon of Rochester, left, and Philip Conti of East Rochester, both workers for Napier Enterprises LLC, attach a shutter on Monday to a rehabbed and now lead-free home at 165 Gregory St.

■ High compliance rates offset by a few concerns, study reports.

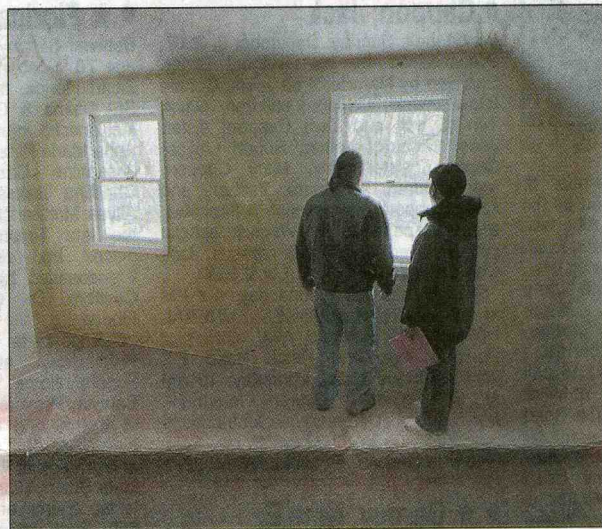
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An estimated one-third of Rochester's rental properties have been made lead safe. But a better-than-expected response to the city's new lead law is worthy of both praise and skepticism, according to a study released Monday.

The Centers for Governmental Research analysis found continued high compliance rates — 94 percent of properties passing visual inspections; 85 percent passing follow-up dust wipe

What's at stake

Children's health and the quality of the city's aging housing stock. Fears that the city's lead law would devastate the rental market have yet to materialize. Instead, housing is being made lead-safe.



ANNETTE LEIN staff photographer

Steve Ippolito, left, and Diann Johnson look out onto their back yard from their new and now lead-free home at 165 Gregory St. They move in this week.

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Lead

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tests — and claimed that landlord expenses have been lower than anticipated.

City Council adopted code amendments in December 2005, adding lead-based paint hazards to city inspectors' checklist for older rental housing. Lead was banned from house paint in 1978 but remains in thousands of Rochester homes and poses health risks, particularly to children. The new regulations took effect July 1, 2006.

CGR's interim report on the two-year study covers July 1, 2006, through June 30, 2007. Other report findings include:

■ Children identified as having elevated blood lead levels has dropped from 604, or 8.3 percent of those tested, in 2004-05 to 403, or 5.6 percent of those tested, during the first year of the ordinance.

■ While the total number of vacant houses in the city declined by 2 percent during the study period, the number of privately owned vacant houses increased by 7 percent, or 147 properties.

■ Dust wipes, required in areas deemed to have a high risk for lead poisoning, identified 430 units with lead hazards in the first year that passed visual inspections.

■ While the Department of Human Services anticipated a surge in need for emergency housing placements because lead enforcement would displace tenants, only three individuals required those services in the first year. In the year prior to the new law, two families and four individuals required placement because of lead paint in their residences.

CGR's interim report does raise concerns, however — including that one-fourth of those doing the abatement work might not be trained to do so. The group also recommends a random sampling of properties that passed inspection to determine effectiveness of enforcement, and seeks to document potential decreases in children's blood lead level tests by having the county start coding children as being city or suburban residents.

A survey of landlords found 46 percent approve of the law,

up from 41 percent before implementation.

The added layer of inspections has been a common complaint, however. And some claim the high compliance rates show there wasn't a crisis that needed fixing. However, Rochelle Ruffer, CGR's associate director for economic analysis, said the group will take a closer look at those statistics with focus groups and other follow-up efforts to be certain the numbers reflect the reality.

The second year of the study also will look more closely at the most common hazards and at dust wipe results.

Landlord Bob Napier estimates he spends about \$2,000 to \$2,500 extra on lead abatement. City and county grant programs help offset that expense, however. Napier, 45, who owns 40 properties in the city, was doing lead abatement work before the city law, working for neighborhood associations. Now he is focused on his own properties.

"(The law) seems to be moving forward," he said, "and, I think, doing what it needs to do."

Napier recently spent \$58,000 on an unusually large rehabilitation job at 165 Gregory St., across the street from Marie Daley Park. The two-story house had been gutted inside, and Napier bought it at a city foreclosure auction. The new residents — roommates Diann Johnson, 54, and Steve Ippolito, 36 — expect to move in Wednesday.

"It's a beautiful house," said Johnson, who saw the house before it was overhauled and brought Ippolito for a first look on Monday. "We just need some more room."

Cleanup options can vary from painting over deteriorated paint to replacing windows or making other, more extensive repairs. Along with alleviating health concerns, those improvements have made the housing stock look better, said Joan Roby-Davison, executive director of Group 14621 Community Association Inc., and an advisory group member for the CGR study.

The study is being funded by a \$108,000 grant from the Greater Rochester Health Foundation, an independent, private organization formed out of the merger of Preferred Care and MVP Health Plan in 2006. □

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