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Lead's venomous bite slackens in Rochester

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Lead poisoning among Rochester children is falling. And every rental unit in the city should be inspected for lead hazards by June 2009.

Whether the falling numbers are a direct result of the lead inspections is unclear, however.

And whether the city will meet a goal of being "lead-safe" by 2010 ultimately will depend on how officials define the term.

But there is progress, according to a status report by the Center for Governmental Research evaluating the first two years of the city's law requiring rental properties to be free of lead hazards. The report, covering July 1, 2006, to June 30, 2008, was released Wednesday.

The number of lead-poisoned children dropped 19 percent in the year before the lead law took effect; 30 percent the year after the law was enacted. And nearly 3,440 rental units have been made lead-safe.

"You want to make sure the law is having the effect it is intended to have," said Maria Ayoob, senior research associate with the center. "It certainly is meeting its goals."

Lead was banned from house paint in 1978, but lead-based paint remains in thousands of city houses.

Ingesting the paint dust or chips can cause organ damage as well as cognitive, psychological and behavioral problems. Children 6 years old and younger are most at risk.

The city added lead checks to rental housing inspections in mid-2006.

Now midway through the third year of enforcement, the city is "on track" — with a couple of exceptions, said Molly Clifford, the city's Neighborhood Service Centers director. Those exceptions involve some landlords' lack of knowledge about lead-safe practices when making improvements, and some landlord and tenants' refusal to let inspectors in.

The city ratcheted up enforcement in the past 12 to 18 months, began issuing more citations for landlord delays and vacating units for repairs.

The next step is to authorize inspection search warrants, through the civil court process, to address 1,600 units where inspectors cannot get inside. That legislation (also to include a landlord registry) should go to City Council next month, after a two-month delay to gather feedback and answer legal questions.

"I don't expect any fundamental changes here," said Municipal Attorney Jeffrey Eichner.

Amid all this enforcement talk, the report shows high rates of compliance. Over the first two years, 92 percent of units passed initial inspection, according to the report, and 85 percent passed follow-up dust wipes required in high-risk areas.

"This house came out without even a trace of lead," landlord Chad Terrusa said, showing off his two-unit rental at 520 Central Park, where officials gathered to release the CGR report.

The house sat boarded up for two years before Terrusa bought it, invested \$22,000 in new vinyl windows, new ceilings and materials to cover and seal the walls and floors.

"You just have to do things differently," he said.

Terrusa owns 15 rental properties in the city, and has made 14 lead-safe. He plans to start work on the 15th property on Monday.

One of his renters on Central Park, 22-year-old Channell Ellis, is the mother of three children, ages 4 years, 18 months and 4 months. Finding a lead-free apartment was a priority.

"It depends on the area you are looking," she said of what she found, explaining she had less trouble on the east side than the west side. "Some are in good shape, but lead (compliance) was shaky."

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