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Cities fight to rid homes of poisonous lead

by Andrew Kitchenman and Lisa Rich
 Tuesday December 16, 2008, 12:33 PM

Ralph Spezio knew in 1999 that something was wrong with the health of the children in the Rochester, N.Y., elementary school where he was principal. Some children would fly into rages without first showing annoyance. Other children would have no memory of lessons taught an hour earlier. While some came from troubled homes, most had loving families, Spezio said.

Then he heard a school nurse and a neighborhood nurse exchange information about a child: "Whoa, another high lead." Spezio didn't know anything about lead poisoning at the time. But after he began to learn about the matter, he reached a unique confidential agreement with children's doctors that allowed him to review their health records.

Forty-one percent of the children in his school had blood-lead levels that have been linked to brain damage and are increasingly implicated in a variety of behavioral problems. Spezio warned community leaders that lead is "an invisible and silent monster that is devouring our children." He helped found a coalition in Rochester and has worked to remove lead from the environment, especially from dust in children's homes.

In Rochester, that effort led to a 2006 city law that increased the number of homes tested for lead, as well as the funds available to reduce lead in homes with high levels of the toxic metal.

Two years later, more than 3,400 Rochester homes have been -- or will soon be -- made "lead safe," according to a report by the Rochester-based Center for Governmental Research (CGR). In addition, the number of children diagnosed with elevated blood lead levels has dropped from 604 in 2004-2005 to 284.

Lead abatement experts consider Rochester's approach to be a success. The example has served as inspiration across New York and is being studied by others in New Jersey and elsewhere.

Rochester and other cities with success fighting lead abatement have increased the number of lead inspectors, focused on the highest-risk neighborhoods, held landlords accountable for high lead levels and built partnerships between the government and nonprofits.

A CLOSER LOOK AT HOME: New Jersey officials are seeking similar success, aiming to take abatement to another level. The state Department of Community Affairs (DCA) is in the midst of doing visual inspections of 850,000 apartments over a five-year period.

In Trenton, the nonprofit Isles Inc. has compiled the results of chemical testing of dust in 885 city homes.

Of those homes, about 42 percent exceed the standard for elevated levels set by the federal Environmental Protection Agency and 60 percent are higher than the standard set by the National Center for Healthy Homes, which some researchers say is more appropriate.

The state Public Advocate's Office released a report in April urging that efforts be stepped up to reduce lead poisoning.

In the wake of the report, various state agencies and local governments have taken a series of steps to reduce the threat of lead.

For example, Trenton plans to reach an agreement with the public advocate to increase home testing.

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However, lead-safety experts and advocates have been calling for a comprehensive approach that will reduce the lead risk throughout the state. While lead paint was banned in the 1970s, researchers are finding that the legacy from the toxic substance remains more than three decades later. Lead poisoning can lead to irreversible and lifelong brain damage to children, and a variety of other ailments in adults including cardiovascular disease.

A NEW APPROACHÂ Joan Roby-Davison, an activist in Rochester, said the city council there faced opposition from landlords and real-estate investors who said they would not keep properties that were too expensive to test for lead. But the political will grew strong enough for officials to take action in 2006. "It does take a level of courage, and we have that here in Rochester," Spezio said. "The only way to kill this monster is to educate people."

Since adopting the ordinance, Rochester has dedicated six members of its inspections department to lead testing. The results have been encouraging. Landlords generally have been making repairs to their properties rather than abandoning them, city officials said. The costs also have been lower than expected, with the cost of improvements running less than \$5,000 per property, according to the CGR report.

"We've seen no abandonment," said Roby-Davison, who now serves as the coordinator for the Empire State Housing Alliance. While the cost of making repairs such as replacing windows is borne by the property owner, grants from the city, Monroe County, N.Y., and a private nonprofit have eased the expense.

Roby-Davison credits Spezio, as well as lead poisoning research in Rochester, for the effort. In addition to requiring property owners to do lead testing to have a certificate of occupancy, Rochester residents can ask the city to test for lead. "It's unconscionable that in 2008, it's not fixed already," Roby-Davison said. Rochester's lead abatement program costs \$1.2 million per year, including \$450,000 for lead testing that is contracted to private inspectors.

A MODEL CITY APPROACHÂ Just as activists from Rochester have been seeking to expand its program beyond that city, New Jersey is planning to use different cities' approaches to lead as statewide models. Under New Jersey's model city program, cities are signing up with the state Public Advocate's Office to take steps to reduce lead.

Camden has passed an ordinance requiring all houses built before 1978 -- the year lead was banned from paint -- to have a full lead inspection and risk assessment before residents move in or tenants change. Irvington is working on a similar ordinance for pre-1960 apartment buildings.

Iraida Afanador, the head of Camden's code-enforcement department, said a federal grant may cover the cost of the program. She credited the DCA with providing free lead training for inspectors.

Community organizations like Isles are hoping that state funds will allow similar programs to be expanded to all high-risk areas. Several efforts do not require additional funding, noted Laurie Facciarossa Brewer, a spokeswoman for the Public Advocate's Office.

These include the training of building inspectors by the DCA, state assistance in applying for federal lead-abatement grants and a new mapping program for lead exposure levels developed by the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey.

Trenton Mayor Douglas H. Palmer said he plans to reach a model city agreement with the Public Advocate's Office and will consider ordinances similar to those pursued by Camden and Irvington. He also plans to add a city lead inspector dedicated to addressing the issue, funded by a grant or through the city budget.

"I just think this issue is so important," Palmer said. The city has been working to reduce the lead threat for more than a decade, Palmer said.

But Palmer said he's also frustrated the federal government hasn't put more funding into the lead remediation, saying the city was turned down two years ago for a federal grant.

City director of Health and Human Services Carolyn Lewis-Spruill said Trenton reaches out to parents through a variety of means, including health clinics and a city health van.

"We've tried to make the parents aware that their children need to be tested for lead," Lewis-Spruill said. She noted that undocumented residents without Social Security numbers can't participate in the city's family health care. While suburban areas have fewer cases of lead poisoning than cities do, it appears all municipalities in Mercer County have children with elevated blood-lead levels.

Princeton Borough is third in the county in the percentage of children with 5 to 10 micrograms of lead per deciliter of blood -- a level researchers say is harmful, but doesn't require further government action or testing.

Princeton Health Department Officer Dave Henry said his department is seeking more ways to increase the screening levels of Princeton residents by working with the University Medical Center at Princeton, and by reaching out

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to local pediatricians.

"We do take the prevalence of lead poisoning as a high priority," Henry said. Health officials from Princeton, as well as Ewing and Lawrence among others, recently participated in a lead-poisoning training session with the state Department of Health and Senior Services, Henry said.

Many local activists and national researchers are exploring how to address lead exposure, and some are raising questions over the standard used by the federal government to determine "elevated" lead levels.

Since 1991, the federal standard has been 10 micrograms per deciliter, but lead expert Dr. Bruce Lanphear of Simon Fraser University in British Columbia is among those who contend the level should be lowered to 5 micrograms per deciliter.

The state health department is in the process of moving New Jersey's standard to 10 micrograms per deciliter, matching the national standard, with the rules expected to take effect in the late summer or early fall of next year. The state's current standard is not as strict as the federal rules.

State Department of Health and Senior Services spokeswoman Donna Leusner said the state would consider lowering the level needed for an environmental investigation below 10 if the evidence is there.

EXPERTS CONCERNED Scientists and doctors who have studied lead poisoning say stronger steps are needed to tackle lead poisoning.

Lead expert Dr. David C. Bellinger said once someone has lead poisoning, the effects are lifelong. Drug therapies can't reverse long-term effects on children's ability to learn, he said.

"It's too late once exposure has occurred," said Bellinger of Harvard Medical School. "The key thing is primary prevention. We're still waiting -- in a sense, using children to tell us, as lead detectors, to tell us where the lead problems are -- the way miners used canaries to see when oxygen was low."

New Jersey and other states face a complicated set of issues to address lead exposure, said Deborah Cory-Slechta, a professor of environmental medicine at the University of Rochester.

"You've got a huge economic cost to undo this problem," said Cory-Slechta, the former director of Rutgers University's Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences Institute. "I know that the state of New Jersey has its own huge budget problem."

It's important, she said, to make it easier for low-income families to apply for lead abatement, saying residents aren't aware of the danger posed by lead and have other priorities that prevent them from focusing on lead exposure.

Pregnant women also should test their homes, she said.

"I'm all for that, because prevention is the only thing," Cory-Slechta said. "I think you have to go beyond these kids. You need to do this before kids are born."

In a study of lab animals, she found that relatively low blood-lead levels cause more permanent harm when they are combined with stressful experience.

"If you add stress to a low level, you can make something worse than it is with just lead alone," Cory-Slechta said.

The study also pointed to a possible cause of why lead is linked to such a wide variety of health problems.

By affecting the body's response to stress, lead can increase hypertension and cardiovascular disease, she said.

"Once there's a stress response, the body then goes to shut down the stress response," she said, adding that when lead poisoning is involved, that stress response may continue too long. "You don't want that to be operating all the time."

Reducing lead hazards indeed comes at a cost, but the benefits far outweigh the dollar amount, said Martin Johnson, founder and president of Isles.

To put it simply, he asks, "What's it going to cost to address this challenge, versus what's it cost to not address this challenge?"

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