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Four Michigan Communities Including Grand Rapids See Increasing Numbers of Lead Poisoned Children

Local increase may be linked to increased renovation and tight rental market.

GRAND RAPIDS – Grand Rapids, Flint, Detroit, and Jackson County saw an increased incidence of lead poisoned children in the second quarter of 2016 compared to the same time period in 2015 (April – June) according to data recently released by the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. The Healthy Homes Coalition of West Michigan and local partners suspect that some of the increase may be an unfortunate but avoidable side effect of increased reinvestment in Grand Rapids’ older neighborhoods.

The increase continues a trend announced earlier this year when the Healthy Homes Coalition held a town hall meeting and shared 2015 State data that showed a dramatic increase in the number of lead poisoned children in Grand Rapids for the first time in decades. In 2015, the 49507 zip code in southeast Grand Rapids had the most lead poisoned children of any zip code in the state. Now Flint, Detroit, and Jackson County are also seeing increasing rates of childhood lead poisoning.

While there was a dramatic decline in lead poisoning from 2000 to 2009, the reduction in lead poisoning had been tailing off in Grand Rapids and across the state since then. “It’s clear that the interventions of the last decade are no longer enough to significantly reduce these numbers any further,” said Paul Haan, Healthy Homes Coalition Executive Director. “We need new interventions now. We need to invest in primary prevention to stop exposure in the first place.”

Last month, the City of Grand Rapids was awarded \$2.9 million by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to fix lead hazards in housing. That investment will help a minimum of 150 households over the next three years, yet there were three times as many children lead poisoned in the city in 2015 alone (465 children).

Following the Flint water crisis, many groups called for increased lead testing of children. While testing children is important for providing public health data and to offer triage service, testing and case managing children comes after a child has been exposed and will not contribute significantly to reducing the incidence of lead poisoning. Exposure sources such as deteriorating lead paint, lead in soil, and lead in water need to be corrected.

Many groups believe the key to ending childhood lead poisoning is found in eliminating all sources of lead in children's environments. "Only when sources of lead are controlled in advance of poisoning will we see the number of lead poisoned children once again drop," said Haan.

The Kent County Health Department and the Healthy Homes Coalition have been working with the State of Michigan and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to identify the source of the uptick in lead poisoning in Grand Rapids. Testing anomalies and lead in water have been ruled out, but the tight rental housing market and increase in renovation have not. In Grand Rapids, the increase in lead poisoned children has coincided with a dramatic increase in renovation activity and a tight rental market.

"When we invest and renovate, there is an opportunity to make housing safer. Unfortunately, far too many contractors still turn a blind eye to federally required lead-safe work practices," said Haan. As of July 2016, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency data showed a 60% decrease in federally certified lead safe workers in Michigan. This decrease in compliance with federal law comes at a time when the renovation of older housing in Grand Rapids is increasingly dramatically.

"We've got a great system in place to catch and help kids who have been lead poisoned," said Haan. The Kent County Health Department tests children in WIC, provides case management and investigation of lead hazards, and numerous organizations in Grand Rapids partner to make sure children are tested. The City of Grand Rapids has a twelve-year track record of leveraging federal resources to help low-income households fix homes.

"It's very important to test and treat lead poisoned children and fix their homes," said Haan. "But after-the-fact action will not result in fewer children being lead poisoned."

The Healthy Homes Coalition has been meeting with state and national lead prevention leaders to develop strategies to reduce exposure. Those potential strategies include eliminating lead water service lines, strengthening disclosure of lead paint and water hazards at time of sale or renting, increased funding and mandating of hazard remediation, and increased enforcement of lead-safe work practices in older housing.

The Healthy Homes Coalition of West Michigan is an independent, non-profit organization based in Grand Rapids that is improving children's health and wellbeing by eliminating harmful housing conditions. More about the Healthy Homes Coalition and their leadership work on childhood lead poisoning is at www.healthyhomescoalition.org.

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State of Michigan Announcement

www.healthyhomescoalition.org/uploads/files/MI_Seasonal_Release.pdf

MI Seasonal Increases Q2 2016 Chart

www.healthyhomescoalition.org/uploads/files/MI_Seasonal_Chart.pdf