

Press Kit: <http://bit.ly/2gXilR3>

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Lead poisoning on the rise in Kent County

- ***49507 sees 40 percent increase in number of lead-poisoned children – the zip code has most lead-poisoned kids in the state of Michigan***
- ***Parents, representatives met on Oct. 30 in Grand Rapids to tackle the lead-paint problem that's poisoned more children than Flint's water crisis***

GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN – Nov. 6, 2017 – When Grand Rapids resident LyRee Adams' young daughter tested positive for lead a decade ago, she later learned the poisoning likely occurred from lead-based paint flaking from windows in the home she was renting. She immediately got appropriate medical care for her daughter before the child was permanently harmed – and Adams also went directly to her landlord and worked with him to get the lead hazard out of the home.

Today, her daughter is a thriving 12-year-old at City Middle School in Grand Rapids. And Adams has already had her 2-year-old son tested for lead – no detectable lead was found.

Not all parents and children in Kent County – and particularly in key Grand Rapids neighborhoods – have been as fortunate.

After a decade of decline, the number of lead-poisoned children in Kent County is rising. Recent data shows a 40 percent increase in lead-poisoned children in the 49507 zip code during the past two years. This Grand Rapids neighborhood leads the state in numbers of lead-poisoned children. In fact, more children were lead poisoned in 49507 than all seven Flint zip codes combined – before, during, and after the Flint water crisis.

According to data provided by the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS), 615 Kent County children had elevated blood-lead levels in 2016 – the year for which most recent data is available. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has established 5 micrograms

per deciliter ($\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$) as the reference level at which the CDC recommends public health actions be initiated.

Lead poisoning is also rising in zip codes 49504 and 49503. Two out of every three lead poisoned-children in Kent County live in zip codes 49507, 49504 or 49503. These are high-poverty, high-minority neighborhoods in Grand Rapids.

African-American children were lead-poisoned at twice the rate of white children in Grand Rapids in 2015, according to MDHHS data.

The lead poisoning is causing serious health problems, including permanent brain damage.

Lead-based paint – not water – is the cause in Grand Rapids.

“Many people are unaware that lead exposure from dust in the house and soil in the yard is the culprit,” said Paul Haan, executive director of the Healthy Homes Coalition of West Michigan and gubernatorial appointee to the state of Michigan’s Child Lead Exposure Elimination Commission.

It should be noted that lead in the water is not the culprit here: The city of Grand Rapids water testing under the federal Lead and Copper Rule demonstrates that Grand Rapids has been in compliance since 2001. The amount of lead in Grand Rapids water is far below federal thresholds and is among the safest in the state.

The alarming lead-paint-poisoning statistics frustrate and anger Adams. Now she’s speaking out. She is part of the recently formed Parents for Healthy Homes group, which met with other concerned parents on Oct. 30 at Dickinson Academy to address the lead problem in the community.

“These are our kids, and they’re being poisoned – our future is being poisoned,” Adams said. “We need to let more people know about lead poisoning and how to stop it from happening in the first place. Prevention is key.”

Lead lurks in the interior and exterior paint of homes built before 1978 – the year lead-based paint was banned – and most houses in the city of Grand Rapids were built before that year. Paint flakes and peels, and when improperly scraped or sanded off, dangerous lead dust can be kicked up. That flaking, peeling lead paint and dust – ingested or breathed in – can be dangerous to anyone. But lead is especially toxic to babies, children and pregnant women.

It doesn’t take much lead to create a toxic situation. One gram of lead dust is enough to make 25,000 square feet of flooring hazardous for young children, according to research jointly conducted by the

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (US-EPA).

“We’re talking an amount as small as the equivalent of a packet of Sweet’N Low – just that small amount is enough to contaminate the floors of a dozen homes in Grand Rapids,” said Haan.

Community rallies to tackle the lead problem.

Why lead poisoning is on the rise in Kent County, and particularly in Grand Rapids – and what can be done about it – was the subject of discussion and debate at the Oct. 30 event held at Dickinson Academy on Grand Rapids’ southeast side.

Held on the heels of the national Lead Poisoning Prevention Week, the event brought together about 40 parents and Healthy Homes Coalition of West Michigan representatives plus Kent County Commissioner Robert S. Womack. Representatives from Home Repair Service, the Kent County Health Department and Legal Aid also attended.

“We need to hear from the community – and especially the parents – about how lead exposure can be prevented in the first place,” Haan said. “There have been a lot of things done in our community to prevent lead exposure over the years. While these things initially worked well, they are no longer resulting in fewer children being poisoned as they used to. I think parents know how we can do better by our kids, and how we can help them to stop hurting.”

The Healthy Homes Coalition of West Michigan was one of 15 organizations nationwide awarded a Lead Poisoning Awareness Community mini-grant from the National Center for Healthy Housing to mobilize local stakeholders, which is part of a national campaign coordinated with the recently released [“10 Policies to Prevent and Respond to Childhood Lead Exposure”](#) report.

LyRee Adams was among the local parents leading roundtable discussions with peers to discuss the problem and what can be done to stop lead poisoning in the community. She was joined by other parent-facilitators, including Shirley Jones, a Grand Rapids parent and grandparent.

“Hearing the stories of families affected by lead – especially that 49507 leads the state for most lead-poisoned children – piqued my interest and I wanted to get involved and talk to parents about prevention. There’s a bed-bug registry for hotels – why shouldn’t there be a similar registry of homes with lead-based paint?” Jones said.

Lisa Matthews, also a Grand Rapids parent and grandparent, agreed.

“We need to get this information out there. There are a lot of parents who don’t know about the dangers of lead-based paint. It’s not necessarily what’s going in the household but what’s actually *in* the house that could be causing problems in children,” Matthews said.

Matthews’ 3-year-old grandson tested positive for lead a year ago. She encourages parents to get their children tested but said it’s also important for the house itself to be tested for presence of lead.

“If your home has issues, even if your child hasn’t tested positive for lead, work together with your landlord to get the lead out before the child is poisoned. As parents, we should be the main ones to step forward. We’re the first to know what’s going on with our kids and we need to take action. But landlords are responsible too,” Matthews said. “We need to work together.”

Dozens of suggestions and comments initially written on Post-It notes by the parents were then projected on a large screen for all at the event to see and discuss.

One parent suggested mandatory lead testing at all yearly health checkups. Another suggested free lead testing of all homes. Many wanted more education about the issue in the community.

Adams suggested “reciprocity agreements” with landlords: “If a renter has to give a deposit to a landlord, shouldn’t the landlord have to give some kind of guarantee that the property is lead-free?” she posed.

Ultimately, the parents in attendance advocated strongly for educational opportunities in their communities, a stronger presence in the media, and required testing of homes and children for lead.

Haan said the group of parents will continue to work on awareness-building and actionable steps, continuing to reach out to a wider array of parents and community leaders.

But why is lead poisoning on the rise after a decade of decline?

Like many communities nationwide, the number of children lead poisoned in Grand Rapids dropped precipitously in the 1990s and early 2000s. More recently, the improvement began to tail off until 2015 when Grand Rapids actually experienced a shocking uptick in the number of lead-poisoned children.

Why? The reasons are complex.

Currently, houses in Kent County aren't required to be tested for lead. A property owner can sell, rent or remodel a home without checking it for lead or lead hazards. The city of Grand Rapids last updated its housing codes in regards to lead in 2005.

“Many property owners and property dwellers may have no idea that dangerous lead exists in their home,” Haan said. “Even well-intentioned remodelers might not be dealing properly with lead and actually making the problem worse.”

Haan also said there is a correlation between the current housing crisis and the increase in lead poisoning. “With West Michigan’s robust real estate market, it’s harder now to find healthy homes to live in. The seller’s market is great for sellers but not necessarily good for buyers and renters.”

He also noted that strategies deployed a decade ago have run their course and are no longer aggressive enough to make a difference. Indeed, there have been no significant new investments or policy changes to address childhood lead poisoning since 2004 – the year the state of Michigan passed a package of bills to address lead poisoning and when HUD funding (to help fix lead-poisoned homes) first came to the city of Grand Rapids.

“While they once worked so well, yesterday’s solutions are no longer enough to solve today’s problems,” Haan said. “It is an environmental justice issue that the 49507 zip code in Grand Rapids has more lead-poisoned children than any other zip code in all of Michigan. We can’t accept that it’s okay for these children to be lead poisoned. We need to do better. We need bold, new strategies and higher standards to protect all kids.”

Haan said the leadership coming out of the [Michigan Child Lead Elimination Commission](#) is calling for a paradigm shift that focuses on primary prevention and controlling exposures. As a result, new stakeholders, many from the private sector, are being asked to step up their contribution to solving this pernicious problem.

“That will not happen without disruption to the status quo, consistent pressure and public accountability for all parties involved,” Haan said. “We need to do more.”

So, what are some possible new solutions?

Discovering and discussing solutions was part of Monday night’s event. But some obvious solutions already exist:

1. All children under age 6 should be tested for lead, especially at ages 1 and 2.

However, Haan noted that finding out that a child has already been lead poisoned is acting too late. “While it is important to test kids, we need to do more than use our kids as lead detectors,” he said. “Preventing exposure in the first place is key.”

(See the Impact of Lead Fact Sheet in the press kit for more information.)

2. Homes must be tested – and fixed if positive for lead – before more children are poisoned. Funding is available to fix homes.

Lead hazards are often invisible, and too many landlords and homeowners simply don't know if hazards exist, Haan said. Systems and resources need to be put in place to ensure testing happens, especially in pre-1960 housing.

And homes that test positive need to be fixed.

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development funding to fix homes.

Last fall, Grand Rapids was awarded \$2.9 million in HUD funding to fix homes with lead-based paint hazards. Typical “fixes” include new windows and exterior painting or siding. The HUD funding is available to eligible homeowners, landlords and tenants.

The city of Grand Rapids administers the funding locally. In September of this year, the city expanded program eligibility, making funding available to even more people.

Anyone who owns or rents a home in the city of Grand Rapids built before 1978 is encouraged to learn about funding eligibility. For more information, please call the Healthy Homes Coalition of West Michigan at 616-241-3300 or visit www.GetTheLeadOutGR.org. Or, contact the city of Grand Rapids Community Development Department at [616-456-3030](tel:616-456-3030).

Changes have been made to Michigan’s Children’s Health Insurance Program to fix homes.

Michigan’s Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) recently received a waiver, which will allow Medicaid resources to be used to fix hazards in children’s housing before they are poisoned. The state began rolling out the new program earlier this year and is looking to work with local partners in heavily impacted communities like Grand Rapids. A consortium of local partners, including the city of Grand Rapids and Kent County, approached the state in August to assist in bringing Medicaid dollars to Kent County to repair lead hazards in homes of Medicaid-enrolled children. The program does not require the child to be lead-poisoned, allows households with children of any age to enroll and will serve rental as well as owner-occupied properties. The state of Michigan is making up to \$1.5 million per year available to local communities. The amount that will be awarded to Grand Rapids / Kent County is yet to be announced.

3. Contractors MUST work lead-safe. Outside of these abatement efforts, Haan noted that too many homes are being illegally repaired with uncertified labor when general maintenance or remodeling is being done.

The federal Renovation, Repair and Painting Rule (RRP), enacted in 2010 and enforced by the US-EPA in Michigan, requires that all contractors working in pre-1978 be trained, certified and use lead-safe work practices. The number of certified contractors in Michigan has dropped off since the initial years of the program.

A recent report issued by the Trust for America's Health and a number of large, national foundations stated that, "if the RRP were fully enforced, 211,000 children would be protected from lead poisoning in 2018 alone and the nation would reap \$4.5 billion in future benefits or about \$3.10 per dollar spent." *(The report can be downloaded from the press kit.)*

"More labor must be trained and enforcement stepped up. Consumers need to know their rights to have their home repaired in a safe way, and government at all levels must advocate by promoting lead-safe work practices," said Haan.

SIDEBAR

Funding is available to *Get the Lead Out!*

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About Healthy Homes Coalition of West Michigan

The Healthy Homes Coalition is an independent, local non-profit organization that seeks to ensure that all children have the opportunity to grow up in a healthy home that is free from environmental hazards. More at <http://www.healthyhomescoalition.org/>.

About the *Get the Lead Out!* Program

The *Get the Lead Out!* lead-hazard control program is a targeted effort to fix homes. It is part of the larger efforts of the *Get the Lead Out!* Collaborative, which also focuses on getting children tested and connected to health care services, educating the public and advocating for common-sense laws and policies to protect children. *Get the Lead Out!* is a

program led by the City of Grand Rapids in collaboration with the Healthy Homes Coalition of West Michigan, the Kent County Health Department and the Rental Property Owners Association. More at <http://gettheleadoutgr.org/>.

Get the Lead Out! partners:



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