



Child Lead Poison Prevention

Lead is a toxin. There is no safe level of lead in the blood. Childhood lead poisoning can cause irreversible brain and nervous system damage leading to learning and behavioral challenges, lower IQ, lower academic achievement, increased hyperactivity, emotional problems, and future delinquent behavior. Over 90% of Ohio's lead poisoning cases result from dust created by lead-based paint in houses built before 1978. Young children are uniquely vulnerable to lead because their rapidly developing nervous system has no defense against toxins. Thousands of Ohio children have already been poisoned and many more continue to be exposed to lead. Last year, 4,263 children tested positive for elevated blood lead levels (EBLLs), which is an undercount and does not disaggregate data by race. Ohio has the second-highest rate of children who test positive for EBLLs in the country

Policy

The Ohio Department of Health (ODH)'s Healthy Homes and Lead Poisoning Prevention Program (OHHLPPP) conducts investigations to identify and abate lead hazards when children have an EBLL. All children must be tested for lead at ages 1 and 2 years if they are on Medicaid, reside in a high-risk zip code, or if other identified risk factors exist, but existing testing falls far short of this. ODH receives federal and state funding for the State Child Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) Health Services Initiative (HSI) lead program, which supports some lead investigations and abatement, public education, and the Lead Safe Rental Registry. ODH relies on local health agencies to help implement the OHHLPPP; however, the lack of resources limits its effectiveness.

In the most recent state budget, \$10 million in new grants were administered by ODH via the Lead Safe Home Fund in FY24-25. ODH also manages GRF funding for local lead prevention including the Lead Safe Home Fund in Cleveland and earmarked funding for Toledo. There is also funding for the Department of Developmental Disabilities (DoDD) which implemented expanded automatic eligibility of early intervention (EI) for children with EBLLs. The Ohio Department of Development also allocated its share of ARPA dollars for lead poisoning prevention.

Challenge

We know lead dust from lead paint is the most common source of lead exposure and yet Ohio does not require lead hazard remediation prior to children or pregnant women residing in a home. Instead, Ohio relies primarily on increasing public awareness and lead testing to identify and abate lead hazards after a child has been lead poisoned, rather than preventing them from being poisoned in the first place, relegating children to the proverbial "canaries in the coal mine." The COVID-19 pandemic posed an

additional challenge: keeping children inside their homes longer and further exposing them to potential lead hazards while also slowing down the number of children tested.

Childhood lead poisoning requires a comprehensive solution that begins with healthy housing. No single agency is responsible for all the factors that contribute to child lead poisoning. However, it is incumbent upon agencies to work together with local and community partners to implement solutions that have a foundation in primary prevention. Furthermore, we must continue to invest in EI funding so that we are taking care of the children and families who have already been negatively affected by lead. DoDD went from serving 56 children in its first year of automatic EI eligibility for children with EBLs to 327 children in FY22 and further growth in the need for EI is expected.

In accordance with CDC guidance, Ohio has lowered its lead reference levels from 5.0ug/dl down to 3.5ug/dl. The change has allowed ODH to identify more children exposed to lead earlier, allowing for a quicker response. However, this has led to a rise in the number of children testing positive for elevated blood lead levels, and it will be necessary to invest in additional resources to make sure children and families have access to educational information and supportive services.

Opportunity

Governor DeWine recognizes the critical importance of primary prevention of child lead poisoning, identified as the “optimal strategy” by the CDC and the American Academy of Pediatrics. However, despite important investments in the previous budget, Ohio still is not adequately funding its lead poison prevention efforts. Over two-thirds of Ohio’s housing stock was built before 1980, many in neighborhoods that bear the brunt of historical disinvestment. If we continue at the current level of funding, it will take over a century before Ohio rids itself of lead poisoning. The funding for the state Lead Safe Home Fund has been an important resource for local communities. Sixteen different projects were funded in FY 24 and FY 25, including 9 county specific projects. Given the program’s success, funding must be increased to help expand its reach to more communities in need. SCHIP continues to have a backlog with over 100 families on the waiting list and is still primarily abating houses where children have already been poisoned rather than its intended purpose of primary prevention. Particularly given how the SCHIP program leverages federal dollars, funding for this program should be maximized. Another opportunity to protect children from lead hazards at the source would be for the state to assume control of the federal Renovation, Repair and Painting (RRP) rule, which requires the use of lead safe work practices when conducting repairs in a pre-1978 unit. Granting ODH authority to manage RRP would offer a solid foundation for building a primary prevention approach. If implemented, these prevention efforts could save lives and increase job opportunities, ultimately saving taxpayer dollars.

Support Child Well-Being: Budget Recommendations

1. Increase Lead Poisoning Prevention Line Item to \$12 million in FY 26, FY 27 to support various initiatives administered by the Ohio Department of Health including the Lead Safe Home Fund.
2. Expand SCHIP Lead Program for High-Risk Children (\$10 million/FY) to remove lead hazards in homes built before 1978 with children under 6 years of age or pregnant women. Increase current \$5 million to \$10 million/year.
3. Allow Ohio Department of Health to enforce Renovation, Repair and Painting Rule to ensure contractors across Ohio are not inadvertently spreading lead dust when working in older homes. This will keep kids, families, and workers safe from lead poisoning.

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