

Brooklyn Children Poisoned by Lead Paint

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Borough Hall --- Brooklyn children are being poisoned by their own homes, concerned parents told the press yesterday.

One father carried a pile of building code complaints he has made to the City over the years; another spoke of his little girl, who was hospitalized for lead poisoning in 1992.

She's now 13 and collecting Social Security Insurance, said Gabriel Thompson, director of organizing at the Pratt Area Community Council (PACC), a Brooklyn not-for-profit community-based organization.

Another sick child tested just below the blood lead level to be officially poisoned, and was told to come back in a few months.

These families joined the PACC members and students from Benjamin Banneker Academy on the steps of Borough Hall to announce their report, "The Politics of Poison," which indicates high lead levels in several Bedford-Stuyvesant buildings.

To conduct the study, ten PACC members and ten high school juniors from Benjamin Bannaker Academy in Clinton Hill were trained in lead-sampling techniques by an EPA- certified corporation. They canvassed about 200 buildings in a 12-block radius, asking residents if they wished to participate in the study and have their homes tested for lead.

This spring, they tested 59 buildings in Bedford-Stuyvesant and found 37 percent have hazardous lead levels, said Gabriel Thompson, director of organizing at PACC.

Using the EPA's guidelines for "criteria for a dangerous home," the testers found nine buildings that had lead levels greater than five times the federal threshold; six had levels 12 times greater; three had levels 28 times greater; two had levels 50 times greater; and one had a level 100 times the federal threshold for a dangerous home.

In addition, many homes were just under the federal threshold; 15 has lead levels 80 percent or more of the maximum lead level.

In 1960, the City banned the use of lead paint in residential buildings, based on findings children were being poisoned by peeling lead paint in their homes.

Medical research has found that lead in children's blood has a negative impact on IQ and cognitive development. In 1991, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) revised its guidelines on safe levels of lead, dropping the case definition from 25 ug/dL to 10 ug/dL. In response, the New York City Department of Health (DOH) amended the NYC Health Code's definition of lead poisoning from 25 to 20 ug/dL in 1992, and in 1999, started conducting environmental investigations for children who tested between 15-19 ug/dL twice over a three-month period.

Most recently, an April 2003 article in the New England Journal of Medicine concludes that "Blood lead concentrations, even those below 10 ug/dL, have been inversely associated with children's IQ scores at three and five years of age, and associated declines in IQ are greater at these concentrations than at higher concentrations."

Carol Abrams, spokesperson for the City's Department of Housing Preservation and Development, (HPD) was also "outraged" by the PACC report.

"They called us on Thursday, and said that they had discovered 20 apartments where small children were living with high levels of lead. They refused to give us the addresses. We certainly think they have a moral responsibility to give the address," she told the Brooklyn Daily Eagle yesterday.

"The numbers of lead poisoned kids in the city continues to go down, and the city is committed to pushing it down as far as we can," Abrams continued. According to the DOH, there were 500 new cases of lead poisoning citywide in 2001. (She had not seen NYPIRG's report that there were over 1500 cases of lead poisoning in 2000.)

"It has been reduced by 80 percent since 1995," she said.

Abrams estimates that 30 percent of city children with lead poisoning brought in into the city with them, and that others get lead poisoning outside of the city. "You know, the City isn't a vacuum."

A Preventive Model

Pacc recommends that the DOH and the HPD "shift to a preventive model" by testing homes randomly in high-risk neighborhoods like Bedford-Stuyvesant and Bushwick, here, and Washington Heights in Manhattan. The Brooklyn non-profit recommends that the City reduce treatable blood lead levels to match national standards.

A proposed law would reduce blood lead levels, and will be debated in the City Council on June 23. The bill, 101a (introduced last year as 101) would replace the 1999 Local Law 38.

But the HPD objects that random testing of apartments without other violations or citizen complaints, would be too burdensome for the city to carry out. Instead, they put the onus on landlords to do this, said Abrams.

Landlords are required to survey residents each year about whether children under 6 years old live in the apartment. If so, and the building was built before 1960, the landlord is required to test the apartment for lead dust.

The City is issuing subpoenas to landlords in violation of their duties, said Abrams. "We issued a set of subpoenas, which is the first of many. We expect to issue a thousand subpoenas; we started with 37, and will issue an additional 100 on Friday."

The buildings targeted by subpoenas had had at least one lead poisoned child in past.

None of the buildings studied by PACC were included in the first set of subpoenas, Thompson said. Students yesterday were enthusiastic about their participation in the PACC community research project.

Christian Fenton, who got involved for the community service credit, said he plans to do more. Other students, too, plan to attend the City Council hearing on Bill 101(a) on May 23rd, and to continue volunteering with the community.

Think You Might Be Affected?

If you have a child under age six and peeling paint, call 311.