

Speaker's flaky in lead poison fight

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When lead poisoning in New York City became a national scandal in the fall of 1969, Gifford Miller, the 33-year-old speaker of the City Council, was in his mother's womb.

That September, some of us who belonged to the Young Lords, a Puerto Rican nationalist group; teamed up with medical students from the old Flower and Fifth Ave. medical college. We went door-to-door collecting urine samples from tenement children and tested them for lead poisoning.

Our results documented alarming lead levels in many kids.

The children, we learned, ate flaking lead-based paint or inhaled paint dust in their apartments. Too much lead creates attention deficit disorders, severe behavioral problems and even lower intelligence levels.

Jack Newfield, then a columnist at The Village Voice, wrote a series of articles that exposed the lead scandal, and the following year Mayor John Lindsay responded with the city's first lead poison prevention program, which became a model for other urban areas.

Nearly 35 years later, the greatest city in the world has yet to eliminate childhood lead poisoning.

Today, in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, one-third of all infants are still exposed to dangerous levels of lead dust, according to a new study released yesterday by the Pratt Area Community Council.

City officials claim the number of children with lead poisoning has dropped to a few hundred a year. While technically that's true, the legal standard the Health Department uses for lead abatement is twice the threshold used by the federal Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

If the city's lead abatements law was in line with the federal standard, the number of cases each year would be closer to 5,000. A study published in the April New England Journal of Medicine showed that even children with lower lead levels suffer from lower IQs.

In 1999, the City Council passed Local Law 38, which relaxed requirements for removal of lead-based paint from apartments and made it harder for tenants to sue landlords.

Last year, Harlem City Councilman Bill Perkins sponsored a new bill on lead poisoning, one that backed by a veto-proof majority of the Council's 51 members.

Enter Speaker Miller, who dreams of being mayor and who already has a million-dollar war chest to match his ambition.

Miller refused to schedule the bill for a public hearing for more than a year. When he finally did bow to pressure from Perkins, instead of assigning the bill to the Health Committee, which oversees the city's lead prevention program, Miller assigned the bill to the Housing and Building Committee.

The housing panel is headed by Madeline Provenzano, the only member of the Bronx delegation who has not publicly supported the new bill.

97G from real estate industry

Miller's critics point out that he has received more than \$30,000 in campaign contributions from landlord lobbyists and \$67,000 from real estate interests.

But his spokesman, Chris Policano, scoffed at the idea that Miller is in the landlords' pocket.

"The speaker supports the continuance of rent control regulations," and authorized City Council funds for tenant groups to travel to Albany to lobby for rent control, Policano said.

"We believe lead poisoning is a serious problem." Policano added, "but there are some complications in terms of removal that must be addressed. The speaker has scheduled hearing on [Perkins'] bill for June 23."