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## How poisoned is poisoned?

By Gabriel Thompson, **Our Time Press**, 1 August 2003. English Language.

One in three Bedford-Stuyvesant children live in homes containing dangerous amounts of lead, according to a study by Pratt Area Community Council (PACC).

The study, called the Politics of Poison, was condemned by both the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) and the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH).

When a small neighborhood group is criticized by two huge agencies something positive is happening.

A few days after the report was released, Commissioner Thomas R. Frieden of the DOHMH held a press conference that recommitted his agency to ending childhood lead poisoning by 2010, especially by "intensifying efforts in high-risk neighborhoods" like Bedford-Stuyvesant.

On June 23rd, Dr. Frieden was in City Hall testifying that a stronger lead bill, Intro 101(a), was unnecessary and even harmful. He took time out while lobbying against the bill to highlight the need to reach out to high-risk neighborhoods, especially in the lead belt of central Brooklyn.

But the PR-friendly inclusiveness of the DOHMH had another side: they failed to respond to our request for a simple meeting. In early June, PACC contacted Dr. Frieden so that he could hear directly from Bedford-Stuyvesant parents of lead-poisoned children, who, as one would imagine, have quite a few ideas about what can be done to improve the situation.

"Look, it's real simple," said Enrique Modesto, a PACC member who lives on DeKalb Avenue. "Frieden needs to drop the definition of poisoning, so that parents get help early," he added. "My daughter Christina shouldn't have been poisoned. Now it's going to cost a lot more to care for her throughout her life. Instead of waiting until the kids are too sick, we should act early."

Some PACC members weren't surprised that Commissioner Frieden initially failed to respond to the meeting request. Adaluz Moran, whose home was discovered to have lead levels in excess of 12 times the threshold set forth by the EPA, also has a three-year-old granddaughter with an elevated blood-lead level. "They already think they know the answers," she said. "But what do they know about Bedford-Stuyvesant? They've probably never even been here."

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After waiting two weeks and hearing nothing from Dr. Frieden, we decided that we might as well go directly to his place of work instead of hoping for a phone call. PACC members and clergy from Central Brooklyn Churches, a coalition of 22 congregations, held a prayer vigil in front of the DOHMH's headquarters on Worth Street in Manhattan. For some reason, though our group was full of small children and clergy, police reported that one of the people in our group had sprayed mace on DOHMH employee. So when we entered the lobby we found ourselves nearly outnumbered by cops.

After confirming that we were neither demonstrating nor prone to violence, we were allowed into the public lobby of this public institution. We explained to the guards that we wished to speak to Dr. Frieden, and finally the head of the DOHMH's Communications Department came down to speak with us. We explained that we were frustrated because we had heard Dr. Frieden commit to working very hard in high-risk neighborhoods like Bed-Stuyvesant, but we couldn't seem to get on his calendar. The communications director was very polite and promised a personal meeting with the commissioner. He has agreed to meet affected parents, PACC staff, Our Times Press and Leroi Gill, executive director of Central Brooklyn Churches.

PACC's demand is simple: Commissioner Frieden must drop the definition of lead poisoning from 20 micrograms per deciliter on a blood test to 5. This will correct a major policy failure of the DOHMH. Only extremely poisoned children are granted meaningful assistance. In 2002, according to the DOHMH's own numbers, 3,985 children were lead-poisoned, but only 628 of these were given apartment inspections so that the sources of poisoning could be identified and removed. Therefore, 3,357 children are in all likelihood still living in dangerous housing – a fact that PACC hopes to change in the future.

#### What You Can Do

Our movement for environmental justice needs every concerned Central Brooklyn resident. Readers can take three immediate steps to join our campaign to protect children from lead poisoning:

1. Email Commissioner Frieden directly and tell him to drop the definition of lead poisoning from 20 micrograms per deciliter to 5. He can be reached at <http://home.nyc.gov/html/mail/html/maildoh.html>. You can also write him an old fashioned letter:  
Commissioner Thomas R. Frieden, MD, MPH  
125 Worth Street, Room 331, CN28  
New York, NY 10013

2. Have PACC come out to your church, mosque, or synagogue to speak to members about the risks of lead poisoning, how to prevent it, and how religious institutions can become involved.

3. Contact PACC organizer Hector Rivera at 522-2613 x36 to be signed up for our action alerts. It will take all kinds of activities from letter writing to demonstrations to change the policies of the DOHMH. As our campaign continues through the summer, we'll keep people informed of future events in order

to keep the pressure on.

The writer is a community organizer for PACC.

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