

**Buffalo and Erie County Lead Safe Task Force
2019 Progress Update:
Childhood Lead Poisoning and the
Healthy Housing Imperative
October 21, 2019**

Executive Summary

While lead is potentially harmful to individuals at any age, it is especially dangerous for children under the age of six. The Centers for Disease Control reports that “there is no known blood lead level for children without some level of risk for some of the adverse neurological effects of lead in children.”¹ Lead poisoning causes permanent neurological damage including loss of I.Q., developmental delays, learning disabilities, memory loss, hearing loss, attention deficits, hyperactivity, and behavioral disorders. In extreme cases, lead exposure can result in organ failure and death. The good news is that lead poisoning is preventable and eradicating lead from our community is possible.

Prevention requires collaboration on every level. In March 2018, a broad coalition of stakeholders released a comprehensive assessment of lead poisoning data for community stakeholders, decision-makers, and funders. This assessment developed a common understanding of the landscape for lead exposure.

Major Findings Updated for 2019:

- Erie County has one of the highest blood lead testing rates in New York State; 2018 screening data shows 72.76% of children were tested by age 36 months.
- Lead poisoning rates in Erie County have decreased 8% from 2017 to 2018.
- Despite collective progress in reducing lead poisoning, the Erie County Department of Health reports that in 2018 there were 266 new cases of blood level elevations of 10µg/dL or higher and 606 children confirmed with blood lead levels of 5 µg/dL (countywide).
- Most children with Elevated Blood Lead Levels (EBLLs) live in City of Buffalo single family homes and doubles owned by over 1,800 different property owners.
- Over 80% of the properties where children are lead poisoned are rental properties.
- More than 75% of landlords of rentals at-risk of properties are local and many live in the same or similar neighborhood as their rental property.
- While large scale landlords are rare, most landlords own 1 to 3 properties and include landlords who have inherited their properties, socially conscious landlords who do their own work, and those who are new arrivals and refugees from around the world.
- Many low-income families are economically trapped in unhealthy rental housing with a long list of dangerous conditions in addition to lead hazards.

¹ Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry. See <https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/csem/csem.asp?csem=34&po=10>

These findings form the backbone of a strategy for a five-year community plan to eliminate lead poisoning in Buffalo and Erie County.

This progress update describes the accomplishments, challenges, and lessons learned over the first year of the plan's implementation by the Buffalo and Erie County Lead Safe Task Force. Significant progress has been made in addressing the root causes of lead poisoning by engaging the community, reaching out to property owners, changing state and local policy, and attracting resources for lead remediation. This report serves as the first-year benchmark in a sustained strategic effort of stakeholders community-wide to eliminate lead poisoning.

First Year Results:

Coordinated Efforts

- The Buffalo and Erie County Lead Safe Task Force was launched to carry out the recommendations of the 2018 Report and has focused its efforts on eliminating lead poisoning through the creation of healthy and affordable housing for all Buffalo's families. The Task Force is co-chaired by the City of Buffalo and Erie County, convened by the Community Foundation, and comprised of a broad cross-section of leaders from government, higher education, philanthropy, medicine, grassroots organizations and faith traditions.
- The City of Buffalo and the County of Erie increased the coordination of their work and share information and referrals on a regular basis.

Lead Hazards Related to Housing

- The City of Buffalo is in the process of hiring two new inspectors to conduct interior inspections of rental singles and doubles beginning with those most likely to protect children from lead exposure. Initial inspections will prioritize properties 1) located in high risk ZIP codes, 2) having known open code violations, and 3) lacking the required lead attestation, proof that tenants have been notified of the presence of lead paint.
- The City is developing policy requiring inspections for rental singles and doubles, which is expected to be adopted in 2020.
- The Erie County Department of Health (ECDOH) now requires an inspection for chipping and peeling paint in rental units before clients with children two years of age and younger can be approved for rental assistance for a security deposit.
- The City has addressed the potential for lead in water through its ROLL (Replacing Old Lead Lines) initiative that increases lead service line replacements and expands its Water Protection insurance program for property owners to replace lead lines when necessary. Thus far, 100 lead service lines have been replaced.
- The City now requires ground cover for soil for residential and commercial vacant lots, demolition sites, etc. to ensure that children are protected from lead exposure.

Increased Resources for Property Owners

- The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has granted \$5.6M to ECDOH to remediate lead hazards for the next 42 months.
- The Erie County Poverty Committee has allocated \$400,000 to develop a fund for low-interest loans and financing to ensure property owners have access to capital to make all properties lead safe. This fund will also link property owners to public and private grants.
- The Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo has launched a new campaign designed by landlords for landlords to educate them on the dangers of lead exposure, their responsibility to notify tenants of potential hazards, the legal requirements of handling lead paint, and the range of resources available to assist them.

Lead Safe Work Practices

- The City requires proof of EPA certification for Renovation, Repair and Painting (RRP) for lead safe work practices upon licensure for all contractors. In the absence of such proof, contractors are referred for training provided by ECDOH and others.
- The ECDOH has provided training for over 400 individuals for the EPA's RRP certification which is required for property managers, contractors, and landlords.
- The ECDOH revised its Sanitary Code to strengthen enforcement of lead safe work practices in pre-1978 housing, allowing it to stop all work done improperly; 53 stop work orders were issued this year.

Community Education and Engagement

- The City hired a new Lead Coordinator to expand education and outreach families to ensure they understand the impact of lead poisoning, can identify lead hazards, and know how to prevent lead exposure.
- Community-based organizations used multiple strategies to increase outreach to families, including one-on-one interviews, training for Community Health Workers, and even a short play developed by Ujima Theater. New parent-friendly materials were developed to provide positive, actionable information for families to improve their homes' health and understand tenants' rights for decent housing conditions.

Lead Screening and EBLLs

- Erie County's lead screening rate for children tested by age 36 months has steadily increased from 69.52% in 2016 to 72.76% in 2018.

- The Western New York Lead Poisoning Prevention Center in collaboration with the ECDOH visited 42 medical practices and educated 125 health providers in outreach events to increase screening rates.
- New York State has increased surveillance and interventions for children with lead levels of 5 mcg/dL or greater, adding new requirements for ECDOH to conduct significantly more environmental investigations than ever before.

Call to Action

Since, the Lead Action Plan's release in March 2018, much has been accomplished, yet much work remains. The Buffalo and Erie County Lead Safe Task Force has driven policy change, increased coordination and connected efforts across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. This year, the Task Force has engaged families, tenants, landlords, and decisionmakers across this community and beyond to Albany and Washington, DC.

Collectively, we built a firm foundation for meaningful change by engaging systems that set standards for health and housing. In doing so, we have learned a great deal about the strengths and challenges of protecting children and strengthening families. The most important lesson learned in our first year is that lead poisoning is inextricably linked to healthy affordable housing.

Through community engagement, home visits and interviews, we learned that families facing the greatest risks live in housing conditions that are marginally habitable. Lead hazards are only the beginning; families can face, among other hazards, infestations of mice, rats, and roaches, a lack of heat and/or hot water, and fire hazards with no secondary means of egress. These families are heavily rent-burdened and generally cannot afford to move, even if the conditions are dangerous. As long as families live in these conditions, there will be lead poisoned children.

In this context, the Buffalo and Erie County Lead Safe Task Force calls upon the community to adopt a sense of urgency in improving healthy affordable housing and tackling the following challenges over the coming year.

- Improve systems that establish housing codes, conduct inspections, and ensure repairs and remediation are completed.
- Create and deploy multiple strategies to educate property owners and increase access to resources to make homes lead safe.
- Design education and outreach programs focused on the needs of tenants and families as advised by tenants and families.
- Advocate for additional state resources to support new ECDOH interventions for children with Elevated Blood Lead Levels of 5 to 9 mcg/dl.

Regardless of race, ethnicity, or socio-economic status, all children should have the opportunity to live in homes that are healthy, safe, energy efficient, and sustainable. Achieving this goal requires the dedicated and sustained efforts of the entire community over time. After the first year of the Task Force's work, the building blocks for success are in place. Let us build on this foundation and strengthen our collective resolve to eliminate lead poisoning altogether.