

POLICY SOLUTIONS

Childhood Lead Poisoning

What is the Problem:

Lead causes damage to a child's developing brain, and may result in permanent damage, including learning disabilities, behavior problems, and hearing loss. Very high lead levels can result in coma and even death.

Lead paint has been identified as a major hazard in Benton Harbor. In fact, the State of Michigan designates the City of Benton Harbor as one of fourteen targeted communities most in need of lead hazard control services. In Benton Harbor, 7.4% of children less than 6 have elevated blood lead levels greater than 10 ug/DL which is considered very dangerous. Additionally, many more children are at risk for lead poisoning, because 90.2% of the housing units in Benton Harbor were built prior to 1980, when lead based paint was banned.

Needed Outcomes:

Lead Poisoning is 100% preventable and therefore it is not unreasonable to aim for 100% of Berrien County children living in lead safe housing.

Strategic goals include: Make Berrien County (particularly Benton Harbor) housing where children are present lead-safe, Educate and Inform residents of Berrien about proper parenting/care-giving techniques to reduce lead poisoning, and sustain a successful and growing Lead Safe Kids Coalition.

Current Solutions:

BCHD operates the Berrien County Lead Safe Kids coalition, which brings together critical agencies including health, lead poisoning prevention, City and County government, inspections departments, and contractors to work together to eliminate childhood lead poisoning in Berrien County. Ms. Theresa Green, Director of Community Health Planning at BCHD, is the Chair of the coalition.

In addition, the Berrien County Health Department nurse provides education and information for all families with children who have slightly elevated blood lead levels, and makes home visits for those with very significant elevated levels.

What Can Policy Makers DO?

City and county officials can establish local housing ordinances and regulations that mandate lead safe housing prior to occupancy. Benton Harbor is considering such an ordinance which would require a visual inspection for lead and clean up of lead if unsafe levels were found.

The state already has a "Landlord Penalty Law" that makes it unlawful for a property owner to rent a unit to a family knowing there is a lead hazard. Funding to

support these programs comes from the Healthy Michigan Fund Program and through Local Public Health Operation dollars and must be continued to maintain the programs that prevent childhood lead poisoning, especially in Benton Harbor.

