

Gateway Green Alliance

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CITY LEAD PROGRAM FAILS TO REMOVE LEAD

November 2, 2005. St. Louis, Missouri. An independent evaluation of a lead poisoning pilot project suggests that the City of St. Louis may be using education and testing programs for public relations rather than as the first steps in removing lead. The poisoning of a child at Mann Elementary School in early October dramatized the need to remove lead from City buildings.

"The City is using children as lead detectors," charged Barbara Chicherio, Co-Coordinator of the Gateway Green Alliance. "They wait until after a child is poisoned until they even test for lead in homes and schools. They City should be testing buildings and removing lead **before** children are poisoned."

Criticism that the City waits until after poisoning occurs was one factor prompting it to kick off the "3300 Nebraska Project" in April, 2005. A block party was billed as the first step in educating residents and making every home lead-safe in what is one of the most highly poisoned areas of St. Louis.

When it proved difficult to obtain an update on the project from the City, the Gateway Green Alliance decided to do an independent evaluation. Under the direction of Research Psychologist Don Fitz, Ph.D., interviewers surveyed residents of all 31 inhabited homes on 3300 Nebraska and 37 homes on adjacent blocks during October 1-11.

What they found surprised the interviewers. "The first finding that jumped out at us," said Fitz, "was the large discrepancy between the residences the City had on its checklist and the houses we found by walking down the street. The City's list had a 31.9% error rate. If they planned to make every home lead-safe, it seems that they would at least create an accurate listing of the homes."

The survey did find that over 90% of residents were aware of health dangers from lead, over 70% wanted the City to help remove lead from their homes; and those who lived on Nebraska were more aware than those on other blocks that they lived in a highly contaminated area. "This does indicate that the City's education program had a positive effect," acknowledged Fitz. "But the problem we found was with how few homes actually had lead removed."

Fitz identified four stages of lead removal. He said that the survey found that for:

- * Stage 1, testing homes for lead, the City's efforts had a strong measurable effect;
- * Stage 2, offering to remove lead, the City's efforts had a smaller effect;
- * Stage 3, setting a date for lead removal, the outcome for the City was not so good; and,
- * Stage 4, completing lead removal, there was no difference between 3300 Nebraska and adjacent blocks.

According to Fitz, this means that the pilot project cannot be credited with completing any lead removal seven months into the project. "Overall, we found that the City was making progress in educating people and testing homes but that it never got to the point of the project, which was to remove lead once you found it."

Ms. Chicherio believes that the City is saying that there is an enormous lead problem but is not acting like it understands what those words mean. "The St. Louis Board of Aldermen needs to declare a Lead Emergency. The first phase of a Lead Emergency should include the Health Commissioner's ordering inspection of all homes in high risk areas, removal of lead from empty homes before they can be occupied, and phased removal of lead from 100% of remaining homes."

Fitz added, "this current evaluation identified 16 vacant units on 3300 Nebraska. The City of St. Louis could begin by removing lead from these properties. Renters are not inconvenienced if you remove lead from empty homes."

Evaluation of the First Seven Months of a Pilot Lead Project in the City of St. Louis

Summary. The City of St. Louis has a lead epidemic, with poisoning rates 7 to 10 times that of the US average. St. Louis City government has been accused of “apathy” in its treatment of lead. Critics charge the City with waiting until after a child is poisoned before testing the home. They advocate that it remediate homes on a block by block basis in order to prevent children from being poisoned.

The City of St. Louis announced a pilot project in March, 2005. It was intended to educate residents about lead and remediate every home on 3300 Nebraska. This evaluation is based on an independent survey concerning progress of the pilot project. The rate of progress found in this evaluation suggests that the City may never complete the task of lead removal.

Interviewers surveyed residents of all 31 inhabited homes on 3300 Nebraska and 37 homes on adjacent blocks during October 1–11, 2005. An unexpected finding was a large discrepancy between home listed on the City’s 3300 Nebraska Checklist and the actual homes found by interviewers. A 31.9% error rate for the Checklist resulted from homes that were listed but did not exist, homes that existed but were not listed, and residences that had been combined. The City’s failure to accurately identify homes on the targeted block raises doubts concerning its ability to complete the project.

Over 90% of respondents on all three blocks knew that lead causes serious health problems. Over 70% indicated that they would like the City to remove lead from their homes. Residents of 3300 Nebraska more often knew they were living in a highly contaminated area. This finding indicates that the City’s educational efforts had measurable success seven months after its April 2005 festival.

The authors identified four stages for addressing lead in a targeted area, with each stage corresponding to a survey question: (a) test the home for lead; (b) offer to treat lead problems; (c) set a date to begin lead treatment; and (d) complete lead treatment.

Residents of 3300 Nebraska were far more likely than those on neighboring blocks to report that their homes had been tested for lead. There was a smaller difference confirming that 3300 Nebraska residents had more often received an offer to remove lead. The third step, setting a specific date for lead treatment to begin, slightly favored those on 3300 Nebraska. But the critical question of whether lead treatment had been completed found no difference between 3300 Nebraska and comparison residents.

Seven months after beginning the pilot project, the City of St. Louis has made no progress in completing the task of lead removal. This suggests that the education and testing programs could be more for public relations than being the first steps in actually grappling with lead poisoning.

The authors recommend that the St. Louis Board of Aldermen declare a Lead Emergency. The first phase of a Lead Emergency should include the Health Commissioner’s ordering inspection of all homes in high risk areas, removal of lead from empty homes before they can be occupied, and phased removal of lead from 100% of remaining homes. The current evaluation identified 16 vacant units on 3300 Nebraska. The City of St. Louis could begin by removing lead from these properties.

Lead is an entirely preventable problem. For most of the last century, the lead industry kept government from taking steps to prevent poisoning. Now that over 90% of the public is aware of the dangers of lead, some governments appear to be more interested in creating the impression that they are fighting lead than taking concrete steps to remove it from buildings.

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