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St. Louis Refuses to Confront Lead

By Don Fitz

On September 19, 2006 the Associated Press documented that as many as a third of attention deficit hyperactivity disorders (ADHD) may be caused by lead exposure or tobacco smoke. The story was based on an article published in Environmental Health Perspectives showing that children with greater than 2 micrograms of lead per deciliter of blood (mcg/dL) had ADHD four times more often than those with lower blood lead levels (0.8 mcg/dL).



Archive photo of children amidst peeling lead paint in the 1970s.

This is consistent with a series of studies demonstrating that the greatest incremental damage of lead to childhood intelligence is at levels between 0 and 10 mcg/dL. These very low levels of lead can damage math and reading scores.

There are two reasons St. Louis parents should be concerned. First, the Center for Disease Control (CDC), the federal agency which sets the "level of concern" for lead poisoning at 10 mcg/dL, has not dropped the threshold, despite accumulating evidence of the harm of very low lead levels. Even more important, the City of St. Louis refuses to join the voices of those calling on the CDC to change its definition of lead poisoning.

On the contrary, City Hall sees lead activists as the major problem. A bone of contention has been the City's policy of using children as lead detectors. The City first tests children for lead and uses poisoned children to find lead contaminated homes.

Lead activists, on the other hand, point out that we know where lead contaminated property is concentrated. (The highest levels of lead are found in old homes with zip codes 63107, 63113 and 63118.) They advocate removing lead from homes before children are poisoned.

In January 2006, the Gateway Green Alliance invited City officials to participate in a forum on lead poisoning. The City ignored multiple invitations until an Associated Press reporter asked why. Doing an about-face, City officials showed up but then belittled requests that St. Louis declare a Lead Emergency.

Lead Safe St. Louis (LSSL) Director Jeanine Arrighi insisted that, even if the City's Lead Safe Blocks campaign did not make any blocks lead safe, it was a positive learning experience. Director of Operations Ron Smith insisted that it was "financially not feasible" to adequately remove lead from St. Louis homes. Dr. William Kincaid, Director of the Health Department, admitted that childhood lead poisoning is a serious problem, but denied that it is of sufficient scope to declare an emergency.

The next day, St. Louis Mayor Francis Slay devoted his entire blog (mayorslay.com) to denouncing proposals that came out of the Greens' forum. What most peaked the Mayor's ire was the suggestion by digger (Daniel Romano, the 2002 Green Party nominee for US Senator from Missouri) that St. Louis should ask that hundreds of millions of dollars devoted to highway construction be re-routed to cleaning up lead. Entitled "Real versus Imaginary Solutions," the Democratic Mayor's blog named President George W. Bush and Republican Senator Kit Bond as allies in bulldozing Green ideas.

On April 20, 2006, the Greens hosted a more extensive forum which included Dr. George Lipsitz (Black Studies, University of California at Santa Barbara), Dr. Daniel Berg (founder of Health and Environmental Justice, or HEJ), HEJ spokesperson Kathleen Logan-Smith, Congressman Lacy Clay and former Alderwoman Irene J. Smith. All challenged the City's practices. The most frequent criticisms addressed the City's failure to recognize the seriousness of lead poisoning and its unwillingness to account for geographical distribution of its \$10 million annual lead funds.

Even though she was not on the panel, LSSL Director Jeanine Arrighi received 30 minutes to answer concerns with the City's actions. She provoked anger as she repeatedly claimed that no one had asked her for

financial accountability, a statement lead activists knew to be false. Robert Cohn, editor of the St. Louis Jewish Light, commented that the City could always find money to bankroll a stadium or new jail but that we have watched children being poisoned for 36 years after Ivory Perry brought the problem to public awareness.

The next month, Mayor Francis Slay held a "community forum" to celebrate a model home where lead had been removed. He neglected to mention that most low income St. Louisans cannot afford to put up the \$17,000 that owners of the model home had to front to get some of the City's lead money. He also did not mention that the home was not in one of the highly lead poisoned zip codes 63107, 63113 or 63118. The Mayor was blatantly thumbing his nose at the call for money to be spent in neighborhoods with the highest need.

The May event was a publicity stunt for what was actually a good way to do "primary prevention." The treatment of the home and rental property included window replacement. The friction from opening and closing windows is where the greatest amount of lead dust in homes comes from. But the press conference gave the false impression that this was what most homes get. In fact, it was the Cadillac of treatments and most property owners have to settle for scraping and repainting with no window replacement at all.

One of the stranger aspects of the Mayor's May 8 orgy of self-congratulation was that it was sponsored by Children's Health Forum (CHF). This left local lead activists scratching their heads, wondering, "What's the Children's Health Forum?" Announcements said speakers included CHF Chair and Founder, Dr. Benjamin Hooks.

Later, the CHF's connection to childhood lead poisoning became clear. On August 4, 2006 the Providence Journal carried a story explaining that the CHF had been formed with support from the DuPont Corporation in 2002. DuPont was one of several paint manufacturers targeted by a Rhode Island lawsuit addressing lead poisoning. Rhode Island agreed to dismiss DuPont as one of the defendants in exchange for payment from the company. But the paint barons insisted that millions be routed to CHF instead of going directly to Rhode Island.

Dr. Benjamin Hooks, former presidents of the NAACP, had been hired by DuPont to help the company deal with its image of poisoning children. Soon after becoming chair of CHF, Hooks wrote an op-ed piece in the Baltimore Sun charging that lawsuits against paint companies were "misguided." This is the behavior of a person who Mayor Francis Slay sees as a major partner in his lead campaign.

But let's not be unjustly harsh on Slay. He's not the only mayor with a link to lead paint companies. The Riverfront Times of April 12, 2000 reported that former Mayor Freeman Bosley, Jr. had been hired to assist the lead paint industries in the City's lawsuit against them for poisoning children. St. Louis mayors just seem to find connections to lead.

Since City government will not develop a plan to stop childhood lead poisoning, we need to do it ourselves. We know where lead contaminated homes are concentrated and we know what it takes to protect children's health. We also know that money is available to do the job - if government would put childhood lead poisoning prevention at a higher priority than baseball stadiums, new jails, highway expansion and wars to plunder oil.

These are steps that Greens and many other activists advocate to protect children's health:

1. Publicly recognize that there is an epidemic of childhood lead poisoning.
2. Declare a Lead Emergency in St. Louis which puts a priority on using money to clean up lead and ask the US government to declare a national Lead Emergency to prioritize spending of federal money.
3. Make "primary prevention" or the removal lead from homes the cornerstone of a lead policy.
4. Begin implementation by targeting the most highly lead contaminated areas in the City and move outward to the next most contaminated areas until lead has been removed from all buildings.
5. Demand that the Centers for Disease Control use the scientific evidence it already has to define "lead poisoning" as occurring when there is any measurable level of lead in a child's blood.

Lead poisoning is an entirely preventable disease. If the current government will not protect the health of our families, we need one that will.

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