



Assembly Health and Senior Services Committee
Childhood Lead Poisoning in NJ
February 22, 2016

Thank you Chairman Conaway and members of the Health and Senior Services Committee for the opportunity to speak today about a public health crisis that has harmed over 225,000 children since 2000. My name is Staci Berger and I am the President and Chief Executive Officer for the Housing and Community Development Network of New Jersey (the Network). The Network is the statewide association of more than 250 housing and community development corporations, individuals and other organizations that support the creation of housing and economic opportunities for people like the disabled who are at threat of homeless due to state action and others who need assistance to afford the high cost of housing in our communities.

Childhood lead poisoning is a completely preventable problem but continues to plague our communities. According to a December 2015 *NJ Spotlight* article, 3,100 children were diagnosed with elevated blood lead levels in 2015. No child should be exposed to this toxin when there is funding that exists to protect these children. I'd like to share the story of Tara McGill, a South Jersey mom who reached out to us looking for help. Two years ago, Tara and her family moved into a beautiful Victorian home built in 1890 in Collingswood which was said to be "gut renovated." As Tara soon discover, gut renovation didn't include everything.

When Tara's family first moved into the home, they knew nothing about lead. They didn't think it was something to be concerned with and the landlord never disclosed any information about it. It wasn't until after moving in that they found paint peeling in various areas of the home. After paying out of pocket for an inspection, they found the dust level in the foyer was 131 - HUD regulations allow under 40 - and the central ac/heat ceiling vent in the kitchen had a level of 56 blowing out lead dust all over the kitchen and living space.

Tara's baby girl was one year old when the family first moved in to the home. Eventually, she developed tooth decay, despite a healthy diet. She also developed strabismus, which is better known as cross eye. Tara's baby nearly stopped thriving, growing only an inch or two taller in the time they lived in the house. She stopped sleeping, and began having screaming fits. Only now at 2 1/2 years old is when she is just beginning to fit in 18-24 month clothes. She is still very small. Tara's daughter - and her parents - will live the effect of lead paint poisoning in their home for the rest of their lives.

In older communities, lead still exists in many homes, because repair, relocation and remediation are expensive. Recognizing the cost to test for lead, remove it, and temporarily relocate the household, the NJ Legislature created the Lead Hazard Control Assistance Fund (LHCAF) in 2004 to allocate resources to remove lead from older homes by offering deferred payment loans or grants to property owners. The Fund has also financed home inspections, emergency relocations for affected families and public education efforts about the risks of living in homes built before lead-based paints were banned.

Our members, nonprofit developers in many of the communities identified as having higher lead levels among children tested than Flint, MI, see lots of homes in their neighborhoods that need remediation. Without funds to properly remediate these homes, they are sometimes unable to help. We know it costs between \$5,000-\$12,000 to remove lead from a home properly and safely. Compare that pittance to the annual cost to of \$32,000 to treat and educate a child who has suffered from lead poisoning.

According to La Casa de Don Pedro Executive Director Raymond Ocasio, the program funding and the applicable health and safety standards only permit agencies like his to remediate a limited portion of the lead contamination conditions that families might face. For instance they may only replace windows with lead using lead safety measures. However, more often than not, lead still remains in other areas of the home because program constraints prevents them from being addressed.

More than \$50 million has been steered into the general treasury since 2009, instead of the LHCAF, as required. State law mandates that fifty cents per gallon from the retail sale of paint must go towards the LHCAF. Lead is known to cause permanent neurological damage in children, negatively affects academic performance, and can cause a wide array of learning disabilities and behavioral issues which is why it is unconscionable that Gov. Christie excluded this funding from his budget.

Gov. Christie told voters in New Hampshire he would include this funding in the budget if it was a priority for New Jersey, and more than 100 organizational leaders across the state, including the Latino Action Network, the State Chapter of the NAACP, and the NJ Education Association, signed a letter to urge him to follow the law and include these funds in his budget. In his proposed budget, the governor failed to deliver on this promise. It is an injustice to divert these funds for any other purpose.

We urge the Legislature not only to support the appropriation of \$10 million back into the LHCAF but also to adopt a bill sponsored by Sen. Shirley Turner that would allow municipalities to inspect one and two family rentals, currently only three family or more are subject to inspections. Tara's baby girl would be perfectly healthy right now if these measures were place.

Some communities are also dealing with lead in their drinking water which we're hearing about today. According to a Public Radio story earlier this month, since 2002 in Camden NJ high levels of lead in drinking water, has led several schools in the city to use bottled water at a cost to the school district of \$75,000 a year.

What has happened in Flint, Michigan has rightly horrified us all. It has drawn much needed attention to the fact that lead poisoning remains a major problem in many communities. Whether it is lead in water, or more commonly in New Jersey, lead in homes, this is a toxic threat to our children's future. It is a public health crisis, and it deserves not only the \$10 million that our state law requires, but the full resources of all of us to make it end. We can stop another generation of children from suffering like Tara McGill's daughter. We can and we must.