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'Danger on the walls'

Though the problem paints were banned for use in housing in 1978, exposure is still a concern the CDC says

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Linda Gilliard was thrilled to say goodbye to her old apartment and move into her own house about a year ago. But the Bronx mother didn't imagine that the large, five-bedroom house on Fordham Road came with a hidden danger that could harm her and her children.

It was in December, when she took her 15-month-old son to the doctor, that she learned the paint inside the house, built in 1938, was lead-based and was harming the child.

"The wall was open and the chips were peeling off," Gilliard said in a recent interview. "The dust, I used to just sweep, not thinking about it. I didn't know I should take a damp cloth to clean. There's a lot of danger on the walls."

She said she took her son, Tyrese Sullivan, to a clinic at Bronx-Lebanon Hospital Center because she was worried about the "sinking" look in his eyes. Then came the shocker: The child's blood tests showed a high lead level - 30 micrograms of lead per deciliter of blood, three times what the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention sets as the highest acceptable level. (The boy's doctor believes the temporary eye condition probably was unrelated to his lead level.)

Gilliard, 43, a single mother who is unemployed, was referred to a lead program at Montefiore Medical Center where additional tests confirmed the diagnosis of lead poisoning. Montefiore relocated Gilliard, Tyrese and Gilliard's two teenage daughters to a modest two-bedroom apartment in a residence on Mosholu Parkway known in medical circles as a "safe house."

Such temporary shelters - there are three in the city, with a total of 12 units - offer a haven to families while lead paint is removed from their apartments or homes under Health Department supervision.

Lead poisoning is an insidious and dangerous malady: It has no clear symptoms and, without a blood test, can easily go undiagnosed. Poisoning can cause learning disabilities and behavioral problems - which, in the case of young children, only may become evident once they are in school. At very high levels, it can result in seizures, coma and even death.

Though lead-based paints were banned for use in housing in 1978, exposure still occurs from lead-based paint and lead-contaminated dust in homes, apartments and deteriorating buildings, according to the CDC.

Tyrese's test results were confirmed just as Mayor Michael Bloomberg vetoed a stricter lead-paint abatement bill that the City Council had passed. On Feb. 4, the council, to the cheers of parents in the second-floor gallery, voted overwhelmingly to override the mayor's veto.

A spokesman for the mayor said Thursday that City Hall still is reviewing options on how to respond. The city could go to court to block the law, from taking effect Aug. 4.

The new law places much more responsibility on landlords. They have to clean up not only peeling or chipped lead-based paint but lead-paint dust as well, and they have less time to address the problem from the time the city's Department of Housing Preservation issues a violation. The new rules also provide more stringent safety and training standards for workers doing lead abatement.

By contrast, the old law placed the burden on tenants to push landlords to address the problem, and limited a tenant's ability to sue his or her landlord.

Bloomberg complained the bill's restrictions were unreasonable and could trigger lawsuits, and said landlords could respond by avoiding renting to families with young children.

While landlords still have 21 days under the new law to fix the problem, the time periods for other types of compliance, such as re-inspections, were shortened.

The city's health commissioner, Dr. Thomas Frieden, sided with the mayor in opposing the law.

"New York City has been at the forefront of attempts to prevent lead poisoning for the past 45 years," Frieden said in a statement regarding the legislation at the time of the council vote. "This law would be a giant step in the wrong direction in our efforts to eliminate lead poisoning."

Councilwoman Christine Quinn (D-Manhattan), chair of the council's health committee, said the new law "is intended to protect the health and welfare of New York City's children."

She said the language of the old law and the new one serve the same goal, and rejected Bloomberg's assertion that landlords might balk at renting to families with young children.

"I just think that's absurd," Quinn said.

Last week, an official from the city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development warned the City Council that the department would need an additional \$15 million to comply with the new law.

Dr. John Rosen, who is treating Tyrese and other families of four other children in Montefiore's safe house, said the boy's lead level of 30 mpd will slowly decrease, but the effects of lead poisoning won't show up until his early years in school.

"Many children in that blood range have irreversible intellectual deficits which impair school performance and ultimately, productivity in the workplace," said Rosen, who runs the hospital's lead prevention program.

The Montefiore Lead Poisoning Prevention Program is the oldest program of its kind in the country and is run by the Children's Hospital at Montefiore.

The hospital had a three-unit safe house, just a few doors away, beginning in 1991. Three years later, that was replaced by the five-unit house on Mosholu Parkway, where Tyrese and his family are living, which was funded through a \$1 million discretionary grant from former Borough President Fernando Ferrer.

In addition to the temporary housing, staff members at the safe house offer medical monitoring, support services and education on lead poisoning.

Nationwide, the CDC says, there are about 24 million homes with lead paint and lead-contaminated dust. Of those, about 4 million homes are occupied by families with young children, who are more vulnerable to lead poisoning because they tend to crawl on floors and put lead-paint chips into their mouths. The CDC says children at all economic levels are affected, but poisoning is most common among kids living in low-income housing.

In the city, aside from the house run by Montefiore, there's a safe house in Washington Heights with five housing units and another in Ridgewood/Bushwick with two units, according to the Health Department. They are funded with a combination of local, private and federal grants.

Deborah Nagin, director of the Health Department's Lead Poisoning Prevention Program, said 628 children in the city under age 18 were diagnosed in 2002 with a level of 20 mpd or above, or had two blood tests taken three months apart with levels of 15 to 19 mpd - a 63 percent decline from 1995. The 2002 figures also show that 4,876 kids under age 18 were newly identified with levels of 10 mpd or higher.

While a simple blood test is all that is needed to diagnose lead poisoning, Rosen noted that recent figures show only 27 percent of children ages 1 and 2 are adequately screened in the city.

Rosen, calling lead-poisoning cases a "tragedy," said the problem could be addressed with adequate attention, including what he called an "inventory" of all pre-1960 housing.

"It's a totally preventable disease and that's the horror of it," he said.

Gilliard, meanwhile, is hopeful that her home will be properly cleaned of lead in the next month or two and that she will be able to move back in. The process includes removing all paint from the house and replacing it with lead-free paint.

Under an agreement with the Health Department, the city will oversee the process and send her a bill for the cost because she owns the home, which she bought from a relative.

The mother, who has learned a lot about lead since her son's diagnosis, reflected on the jeopardy still posed by lead-based paint and dust.

"It's scary, because you don't really know how it could damage them," she said, cradling her son. "They really should teach people more about it."

Help and information

The three "safe houses" in the city for families whose homes are undergoing lead removal are the Montefiore Lead Safe House in the Bronx, 718-547-2789; the Northern Manhattan Improvement Corp. in Manhattan, 212-543-0260; and the Ridgewood/Bushwick Lead Safe House in Brooklyn/Queens, 718-386-7200.