

## Editorial: Don't give up the war on lead

By The Detroit Free Press Editorial Board Filed Under Opinion Editorials Wayne State University

Oct. 21

freep.com

For a decade, a partnership between foundations, government and nonprofits was making a dent in one of Detroit's most pervasive problems: lead, a contaminant that has serious, irreversible effects for children, in thousands of homes.

There's no great mystery about how to abate lead hazards: You test for them, then deal with them. But the execution is more complicated. Funding has long been a problem, and coordination between agencies confounds consistent efforts.

That's all about to get worse in hard-hit cities like Detroit, thanks to Congress. First, lawmakers slashed the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's lead abatement funding from \$29 million to \$2 million in the 2013 budget. Then the sequester hit and plunged lead funding to \$1.8 million — that's for the entire country.

So in Detroit, where there's older housing stock and a population that's resource-poor already, lead is about to become a more pernicious foe, and the city's children will pay the price.

It's an issue crying out for a leader — at the national or local level — to make it more of a priority.

### Kids at untold risk

The effects of lead poisoning are irreversible — inattention, hyperactivity and irritability at low levels; learning disabilities, delayed growth and hearing loss at higher levels. It's essential to stop the damage before it occurs, which is incredibly difficult in cities like Detroit.

And the cost for the city's children is staggering.

A University of Michigan study issued this February made a startling finding: High levels of lead in the blood of Detroit Public Schools students could be linked to the city's abysmal test scores. The report follows a 2010 study by the schools in partnership with the city's health department that found just 23 of the almost 40,000 DPS students tested didn't have lead in their bodies. The more lead in a student's body, the U-M study found, the more likely that student was to perform poorly on tests.

Any community with older homes risks lead contamination. But Detroit is particularly at risk. Why? About 90% of the housing stock in Detroit was built before 1980, the year lead-based paint was removed from retail shelves. Most of the housing in Detroit is single-family, and during the building booms of previous decades, lead-based paint, then considered top-of-the-line, was a selling point for would-be homeowners.

The CDC is one of two primary funding sources for lead abatement. It funnels cash to states, which dispense the funds on the local level. Congress' cut to the CDC's budget came around the same time a CDC advisory committee lowered the blood-level threshold for dangerous lead poisoning from 10 micrograms per deciliter of blood to 5 micrograms. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's lead abatement grants are still available.

Even with full funding, lead abatement advocates face serious challenges: Programs and resources are split across agencies, requiring a high level of coordination to return results; funds to support lead detection and abatement are dwindling; and, most significantly, the resources that are available generally can't be brought into play until after a child has been poisoned.

"Which is closing the barn door after the horses are out. ... We need to get into primary prevention, to prevent lead poisoning from happening ever," said Lyke Thompson, the director of the Center for Urban Studies at Wayne State University and project coordinator of the Detroit/Wayne County Green and Healthy Homes Initiative.

There are hundreds of thousands of homes with lead in Detroit, Thompson said.

"If you're lucky, between the feds and the state you might see even 500, or some years 1,000, homes that are lead abated," he said. "So the investment means that it's going to be hundreds of years before all the houses that need it are renovated. Abatement tends to focus on houses where kids have been lead-poisoned already, Michigan law allows prosecutors to charge landlords on whose property a child has been lead-poisoned with a crime, but at that point, the damage has been done."

That's one frustration for Wayne County assistant prosecutor Mary Morrow.

Still, Morrow has been able to use the law as leverage — the Prosecutor's Office can require a landlord who owns multiple properties to abate lead at all of them, not just the one that brought the landlord to the prosecutor's attention, in order to avoid criminal charges. She estimates that more than 200 homes have been abated since the program began — but it could have been closer to 1,200.

But Morrow says her office is clogged with boxes full of open cases that can't be prosecuted. Once a child is identified as lead-poisoned, the landlord is notified that he or she is facing criminal charges unless the property is addressed. If the landlord abates the lead, the case is settled. But for the Prosecutor's Office to make that determination, the City of Detroit must re-inspect the property. That's the same City of Detroit that has seen its work force and revenue drop precipitously. And this is where the process derails.

Lead inspections are lengthy and costly, said Jane Nickert of the city's Institute for Population Health, the independent nonprofit that was formerly the city's Department of Health and Wellness Promotion.

"Who pays for the follow-up inspection so they can move forward with prosecution?" Nickert said. "With the Institute for Population Health, I have no inspectors on board. We have this tool out there that can't be used."

Some recently allocated state funding will provide one inspector to handle lead in the city of Detroit — a move Nickert says will help, but doesn't begin to match the volume of homes that must be abated.

Foundation dollars have helped close the gap, said Mary Sue Schottenfels of Clear Corps Detroit, but once again — this is a volume problem.

"The biggest obstacle is funding," she said. "We know exactly what to do. We really figured out exactly what to do with lead, including moving landlords to action, educating families, and getting city departments to prioritize lead."

Part of the problem is that for most people, lead isn't top of mind. Lead-based paint has been off the shelves since 1980, and for most people, lead is firmly identified as a hazard of the past. The public eye has focused on newer ailments or environmental hazards that compete for grant dollars.

But there are a few things that could make lead abatement more functional.

The first, obviously, is to restore or increase funding — funding pays for abatement, inspection, testing and counseling for children and families of children who have been lead-poisoned. But equally important is enforcement of the city's building maintenance code. It's essential that landlords get property tested, abated and registered with the city.

That's the kind of primary prevention that could stop kids from being poisoned in the first place. Accelerating the pace of demolition of structures with lead would remove environmental hazards. And education of parents, so they're aware of the dangers of lead, is another piece that can't be overlooked.

But it all comes back to money. In the face of dozens of other competing needs and causes, lawmakers can't forget that this is a real opportunity to make a difference for thousands of Michigan children.