

MILWAUKEE COUNTY

Lead-free activists win pledge from local politicians to support \$240,000 to provide free lead education kits to new moms

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Syeeda Hensen said getting sick during the cryptosporidium outbreak of the 1990s may have prevented her children from a lifetime of lead poisoning.

When she and her husband, Kevin, moved into their home in October 1992, they didn't realize it had lead pipes.

During the outbreak, the whole family got sick and they stopped drinking the water.

Hensen was five months pregnant at the time.

"My daughter was born 33 days premature. She was jaundiced with a very weak immune system. I thought it was the cryptosporidium, but we soon found there were lead pipes in our homes."

Hensen was one of two mothers to give testimonials about the devastating effects of lead poisoning at a summit hosted by the Coalition on Lead Emergency Thursday at Hephatha Lutheran Church, 1720 W. Locust St.

Representatives from MICAH, Leaders Igniting Transformation, Amani United and several other coalition members met in support of \$240,000 in funding for the Birthing Moms pilot program in the 2020 Milwaukee city budget.

The program would provide lead education kits, which include a certified filtering pitcher, to new mothers immediately after they give birth.

Members of the coalition got pledges of support for the program from Aldermen Ashanti Hamilton, Kalan Haywood II, Russell Stamper, Jose Perez, Nicholas Kovac, Mark Borkowski and Milwaukee Health Commissioner Jeanette Kowalik.

"We want to intervene upstream," Kowalik said. "By providing this birthing kit and intervening before they leave the hospital, we can educate parents about lead."

Before Kowalik's tenure, the Milwaukee's Health Department came under fire for failing to prove it provided services for the families of children with lead poisoning, leading to the resignation of Health Commissioner Bevan Baker.

An average of 3,000 of the 25,000 Milwaukee children tested for lead each year have elevated lead levels, the Journal Sentinel previously reported.

Bruce Lanphear, a professor of health sciences and epidemiology at Simon Fraiser University, said lead can cause nervous, cardiovascular and renal system damage.

In children, it's been known to cause IQ deficits, attention and conduct disorders.

Most homes built before 1978 have lead pipes, which can flake into drinking water, or lead paint, which can chip off or turn into dust that small children can ingest.

The Milwaukee Water Works maintains a searchable database of properties with lead service lines.

What's been done

According to the city website, 2,175 lead laterals have been replaced to date.

Department of Public Works spokesman Brian DeNeve said the 2019 budget included over \$3 million to help property owners pay for replacing the lead service lines in their homes, along with \$900,000 in grant funding.

The 2019 budget for the Milwaukee Water Works department, which is responsible for replacing the non-residential lead lines, earmarked \$5 million for replacement of the city-owned lead service lines.

And in July of this year, the Milwaukee Common Council passed a resolution championed by Ald. Jose Perez protecting renters from eviction if they report lead in their buildings.

His legislation was highlighted at the summit.

"One child poisoned by lead is one too many," he said.

Funding

According to DeNeve, replacing all of the lead service lines in the city would cost \$750 million.

At the state level, Gov. Tony Evers' attempts to fund a number of water programs were stifled by Republican lawmakers, who eliminated \$40 million to replace lead water pipes in communities, including Milwaukee.

Milwaukee County Supervisor John Weishan said he is frustrated by the state Legislature and blamed them for the slow progress.

"I think that the Republicans in the state Legislature just don't care," he said.

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In his 2020 budget, Mayor Tom Barrett proposed spending more than \$21 million for lead, including \$8 million in lead paint abatement and \$13 million for lead pipe replacement, testing and filters.

He said the city would also provide safe home kits and education to at-risk families in the most affected ZIP codes.

What remains

At a pace of replacing 1,000 lead lines per year, it will take 75 years to replace all of the lead service lines in the city.

That's because under the city's Lead Service Line Replacement program, lead service lines from the water main to the water meter will only be replaced if they are leaking or damaged.

Robert Miranda, a spokesperson for the Freshwater for Life Act Coalition, said the city can't wait that long.

"To say that they're moving at a snail's pace would probably make it optimistic," he said. "We have seen other cities take the lead on dealing with this issue. ... Milwaukee seems to be on a treadmill going nowhere and still not implementing policies that would really move to aggressively not only protect the community but remove those pipes."

What residents can do in the meantime

As the lines are being replaced, the city recommends that people drink and cook with water filtered with an NSF/ANSI standard 53 certified lead filter.

This is especially true for women ages 15-45, pregnant women and children up to the age of 6, all groups at a higher risk of exposure.

For homes with or without filters, they advise residents to:

- Run tap water for three minutes until it is cold.

- Use only cold tap water for drinking and cooking.

- Rinse debris from the aerators in faucets monthly.

- Run tap for 10 minutes after water-related construction projects.

The city of Milwaukee website has a page dedicated to its Home Environmental Health Division, Lead and Water page and Lead Safe Home Improvement.

Alison Dirr contributed reporting to this article.

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