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Monroe faulted in lead testing State audit says children after age 6 not properly screened

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Children in Monroe County are among more than 100,000 statewide who are not properly screened for lead poisoning, according to an audit released Thursday by the state Health Department's Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program.

While critical of state efforts to curb lead hazards, the comptroller's report also highlighted shortcomings in Monroe County, which it said was the only one of the five counties reviewed that stops providing services and case management to children when they reach 6 years of age.

The findings sparked criticism and fingerpointing on Friday, with blame going to the state for not providing clear standards or enough funding; parents and doctors for not following through; and the Comptroller's Office for unfair criticism. All this in a state and a county that officials say lead the nation in screening for child lead levels and hazardous housing.

"There is a lot of work to be done, and it comes at an important time when the state is closing in on the CDC deadline of eliminating lead poisoning by 2010," said Russ Haven of the New York Public Interest Research Group, a nonprofit research and advocacy organization that he said has monitored lead policy since the late 1980s and has worked closely with the Rochester Coalition to Prevent Lead Poisoning.

Lead was banned from house paint in 1978 but remains in thousands of Rochester homes and poses serious health risks, particularly to children. The city added lead hazards to its inspectors' checklist for older rental housing starting in July 2006.

If ingested in paint chips or dust, lead can cause organ damage as well as cognitive, psychological and behavioral problems. Children 6 and younger are most at risk.

Audit's main findings

The audit, covering state oversight between April 2002 and March 2006, also reviewed Onondaga, Erie, Schenectady and New York counties. The screening data was from April 2002 through December 2004. According to the audit:

About 35 percent of children in the counties surveyed were not screened for lead poisoning.

The state's Advisory Council on Lead Poisoning Prevention had no meetings between 1997 and 2004, and it has not submitted a required annual report in nearly 10 years.

The state Health Department must improve its oversight of county activities to ensure that the program is functioning as intended.

Thirty-nine of 58 counties statewide were late in submitting reports and plans to prevent poisoning. Six counties took two years to file their reports.

"During our visit to Monroe County, officials told us that as soon as children reach 6 years of age, they are discharged from case management unless otherwise requested by their provider, even if a child has been continuously receiving case management services," according to the audit. "Monroe County was the only one ... that used this practice. Currently, regulations require screening and assessment for children 6 months to 6 years of age."

Monroe County's response

The audit also found that while state regulations require day care providers to obtain and retain a certificate of lead screening for a child, Monroe County officials did this only when specifically requested, said Jennifer Freeman, a spokeswoman for the Comptroller's Office.

John Ricci, a spokesman for the Monroe County Health Department, said Friday afternoon that the earliest the county would be able to comment on the audit would be Monday.

"We have not seen the report yet and therefore cannot comment on it until we have had the opportunity to review the report," Ricci said.

The county has been working with various partners, including the Coalition to Prevent Lead Poisoning, based in Rochester. Derrick Hazle, the coalition's executive director, said added state funding is needed to hire more outreach workers. Gov. Eliot Spitzer has set aside additional dollars to bolster such efforts.

Local certificates on way

Meanwhile, the coalition's Science and Testing Committee, of which the county is a member, developed its own lead screening certificates last August. They now are working to get the certificates out to parents and pediatricians, Hazle said. "It's hard to hold somebody accountable for a testing certificate that you haven't even developed," Hazle said of the state.

That aside, he welcomed the audit because it highlighted the need for continued vigilance. "I think our county actually is way ahead of the rest of the state ..., but there is certainly more work to be done."

In April, county officials released figures showing that the number of children who were newborns to age 5 with elevated blood-lead levels fell from 3,710 in 1995 to 571 in 2006.

But officials noted at the time that fewer children were being tested for lead poisoning. The number of children being screened decreased from a high of 19,285 in 1995 to 14,561 last year.

Faulting the audit

Improvements won't come easily.

Claudia Hutton, the state Health Department's spokeswoman, said state law does not permit government health officials to implement some of the audit's recommendations.

"We're not the physician police," she said, noting that officials do not have open access to patient records. Besides, she said, screening is not mandated. "Parents can say no. And some do."

Hutton said the state and county programs are good ones, and expanding those efforts, educating parents and using new technology are important to decrease and even eliminate lead poisoning in children.

Meanwhile, Rochester is preparing to expand its testing of older rental housing beginning next month.

"The only way to prevent this (lead poisoning)," said Haven of NYPIRG, "is to prevent exposure before the damage is done."

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On the Web

To read the audit findings, visit www.osc.state.ny.us/audits/allaudits/093007/04s49.pdf.

For a copy of a related policy report, visit www.osc.state.ny.us/reports/health/childleadpoisoning.pdf.

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