

New law sets toughest standards in nation for lead exposure

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Environmental and health groups say it will better protect young children

ST. PAUL, MN— Cody Oesterreich and her family moved into a house in the Phillips neighborhood of Minneapolis late last year and as a concerned mother she eventually took her then-seven-month-old daughter, Ila, in for a test to make sure she was not being exposed to lead in the old house.

“The doctor told me, ‘we won’t call unless it’s elevated,’ ” Oesterreich said at a Monday news conference in Richfield. “But I called them and the nurse told me, ‘it’s fine, it’s only eight.’”

Oesterreich knew better and she and Ila moved out for a week while the house was cleaned. Thanks to a law that went into affect Thursday, July 1, other parents will have an easier time finding out their child’s lead levels and what to do.

The law, which was conceived by Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy’s Public Health Scientist Samuel Yamin, makes Minnesota one of the leaders in fighting lead in children’s blood. The law requires the Minnesota Department of Health to establish guidelines for doctors and other medical personnel when a child’s blood is between five and 10 micrograms per deciliter of blood. The federal standard is 10 and above.

“Our society has made great progress in reducing children’s exposure to lead,” Yamin said. “But they are still exposed to what was once thought to be safe levels and which we now know are hazardous. The federal government set its level 20 years ago, but we know from research around the world that at these lower levels, lead can have an impact on the brains and on the development of children.”

Dan Newman, executive director of Sustainable Resources Center in Minneapolis, was the group that helped Oesterreich determine that there was lead on the floor where Ila was crawling and that the lead probably came from the soil in the yard and from paint on the old windows and sashes. They helped her replace the windows and excavate the top six inches of soil in the yard.

Newman said that while only about a quarter of Minnesota children have been tested, of those tested in 2008, 9 percent or 8,857 of them had levels between five and 10 micrograms per deciliter.

“Lead is a poison and it is all around us,” Newman said. “It’s not limited to the urban core or to run down housing. Richfield, Brooklyn Center, Crystal, whenever we have tested we have found it. Any home built before 1978 might contain lead paint. Lead in the soil comes primarily from exterior paint and leaded gasoline. Lead can also come from water, food, candy, toys, cookware and makeup.”

While the guidelines still must be established by the health department, the Minneapolis Department of Health and Family Support already takes action with children found with the lower levels, said Angela Hackel, a family support specialist with the city.

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Her department will follow up with parents and suggest they look at where their children are crawling and playing and keep it as clean as possible. She will explain in detail how to clean some areas with two buckets of water. They also recommend a diet high in iron, calcium and vitamin C because that prevents the body from absorbing lead, Hackel said. She also tries to find money to help families make their homes safe from lead, Hackel said.

Rep. Jim Davnie, a Minneapolis DFLer, said he was honored to carry the bill and “we came together for a more aggressive standard” so that Minnesota children have the best chance to succeed in life and education, and not have their abilities diminished by lead.

“Lead takes away their opportunity to contribute,” Davnie said. “We also are justifiably concerned that not all children are succeeding in the educational system.”

Sen. Patricia Torres Ray, the Minneapolis DFLer who carried the bill in the senate, was passionate about how this tougher standard could make children better students in school. The new guidelines will likely rely heavily on medical personnel explaining to parents the hazards of lead and what they can do about it in the home.

“I’m really pleased we could pass this bill and we need to educate the parents,” Torres Ray said. “We must be a voice for these children because we want every child to have a healthy environment and we want to make sure they can succeed in their education.”