

Another Voice / Health concerns

Address threat of lead poisoning in Western New York

By Alfonso O'Neil-White
 Updated: 10/13/08 7:25 AM

Buffalo's lead poisoning rate is one of the worst in the United States and twice the New York State average. Our children are 400 times more likely to suffer irreversible brain damage and developmental disabilities leading to reduced attention spans, hyperactivity and problems in and out of school — problems that, in adulthood, impact our families, society and economy.

Within the next few days, Gov. David

A. Paterson must decide whether to sign into law the Childhood Lead Poisoning Primary Prevention and Safe Housing Act. Without this legislation, New York State once again will delay addressing a health crisis that should have been dealt with years ago.

Lead poisoning in children occurs from frequent exposure to deteriorating lead-based paint in housing stock built before 1950, like the homes in most of Buffalo's urban neighborhoods. Over time, the paint turns into poisonous dust that enters children's systems through their hands and mouths.

The majority of Buffalo's incidents have been found in seven ZIP codes. While lead poisoning is an equal opportunity menace, we cannot ignore the fact that black and Latino children are far more likely to live in these high-risk areas. In fact, more than 90 percent of Buffalo's black children under the age of five live in these high-risk areas.

Current state law requires local health departments to look for sources of lead only after a child has been identified through a blood test as a victim of lead poisoning. The new law would require the development of lead poisoning prevention plans for 30 lead "hot spots" across New York. In addition, health screenings would improve for children and pregnant women.

Homeowners and landlords who rid their properties of lead paint would receive tax credits to cover half their costs, with a maximum of \$1,500 per property and \$5,000 per taxpayer. New York also would be eligible for millions of dollars in grants from the Department of Housing and Urban Development to train and certify lead abatement workers.

The legislation requires communities to work together to develop the most suitable local methods to find the housing likely to have lead-paint hazards. We know how to address this problem and locally, the Community

Foundation for Greater Buffalo is developing the Lead Poisoning Prevention Project based on a partnership between the City of Buffalo, Erie County, Blue-Cross BlueShield of Western New York, Environmental Education Associates, Community Action Organization and the Board of Block Clubs. The goal is 100 lead-safe homes within 18 months and the success of this initiative would be greatly enhanced by the new law.

The costs of lead poisoning to our citizens and our society are staggering and tragic. For the sake of our children and our future, the governor should sign this legislation into law so this crisis finally can be addressed.

Alphonso O'Neil-White is president and chief executive officer of BlueCross Blue-Shield of Western New York.

Browse, research and plan your dream home with HomeFinder Extra.com