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## Monroe County lead risk declining

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The number of Monroe County children who are at risk of lead poisoning has dropped significantly over the last five years, but hundreds still have potentially dangerous levels of lead in their blood, according to data presented Thursday by the Monroe County Health Department.

The health department reported that 426 young children tested in 2007 had blood lead levels deemed harmful by the federal government, down from 1,234 young children who had harmful levels in 2002. The drop in numbers comes as the county reports testing more children younger than 6, who are most at risk of brain damage and poisoning from lead exposure. Last year, 14,917 young children were tested — 1,380 more than in 2002 — including many from dilapidated neighborhoods where old homes are more likely to contain lead-based paint and dust.

City and county officials applauded the statistics as a sign of progress after decades of concerning reports, but they called for increased effort to end lead poisoning.

"I still think there's a lot of work to be done," said Rochester Mayor Robert Duffy. "(Children) are being exposed to a situation that we can fix."

Rochester mom Tyra Barton said her 11-year-old son was exposed to lead more than eight years ago in an acquaintance's home, and has since had chronic headaches that have disrupted his school work and playtime. Her son was tested as a toddler and found to have 15 micrograms of lead per deciliter of blood. The federal government deems any level higher than 10 micrograms as harmful, and levels higher than 20 micrograms as confirmed lead poisoning.

"I didn't know how serious lead was," she said. "This has to come to a stop."

In 2006, following reports of thousands of Monroe County children with elevated blood lead levels, Rochester enacted what local government officials called one of the country's most targeted city lead abatement laws. In recent years, community groups like the Coalition to Prevent Lead Poisoning have also worked on initiatives to educate parents and test for lead in old homes. Duffy said the city budgeted nearly a million dollars annually for related programs and inspections.

This year, the county plans to unveil another initiative to train homeowners and remodelers on the risks of lead exposure, said County Executive Maggie Brooks.

"Four hundred twenty-six is not an insurmountable number," she said. "We can eradicate the problem of lead poisoning in our community."

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