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Lead poisoning opponents mark progress

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Officials working to stop Rochester children from getting poisoned by old lead paint celebrated two victories Thursday, even as New York's governor vetoed stricter legislation to prevent lead-poisoning in many communities.

A new \$4 million federal grant — the largest Rochester has gotten for lead efforts — will pay for assessing and rehabilitating about 200 more rental units and 50 more owner-occupied houses. The grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, one of 61 projects across the nation awarded \$131 million this week for lead efforts, also will pay for training in lead-safe practices and for educating the community about the dangers of lead and how to minimize risks.

City Mayor Robert J. Duffy announced the HUD funding as he and other local leaders were gathered outside the freshly repainted home of Destiney A. Fraguada-Ortiz and her two sons. The home is the first made lead-safe under a \$2 million grant from the Greater Rochester Health Foundation aimed at a 10-block area in northeast Rochester. That money, channeled through Action for a Better Community, will rehabilitate 170 homes.

Previous public funding over the past four years has allowed the city to make 566 homes lead-safe so far.

"Everything we do here saves a child from becoming lead-poisoned," said Duffy.

Lead paint was common before it was banned in 1978 because it can cause irreversible brain damage, hyperactivity, reduced attention spans and even death at high levels. The damage happens when children breathe the dust or eat paint chips created by deteriorated lead-painted surfaces.

The efforts to fix the dangers — using both public and private dollars — are working. In 1995, more than 3,700 children under age 5 in Monroe County had lead poisoning.

In 2007, the number dropped to 462 children. "That's still 462 too many," said County Executive Maggie Brooks, while cheering the progress.

Rochester has taken a more proactive approach than the state requires. The state mandates only that health departments look for sources of lead after a child's blood test indicates lead poisoning. Rochester is trying to prevent poisoning. Since July 2006, the city has required inspectors to check older rental housing for lead-based paint hazards.

Gov. David Paterson on Thursday vetoed the Childhood Lead Poisoning Primary Prevention and Safe Housing Act, which would have required lead poisoning prevention plans for the 30 communities in the state with highest levels of lead poisoning, provided tax credits for homeowners and landlords who solve lead paint problems and lowered the blood-lead threshold

that triggers intervention.

The measure — sponsored by Assemblyman David Gantt, D-Rochester, and Sen. Joseph Robach, R-Greece — would have required pregnant women and young children to be screened for lead poisoning. The program was estimated to cost the state about \$13 million in tax revenue and expire in 2011.

Paterson blamed the state's financial squeeze: "Over the last several months, I have been compelled to disapprove many bills as a direct consequence of the state's fiscal crisis," he said. "A great number of those proposals were very worthy initiatives of great importance to legislators and their constituents. However, no bill pains me more to veto than this measure."

He said he'll present a new plan to deal with the problem on Dec. 18 when he presents his budget plan for next year.

Fraguada-Ortiz is glad her sons, now 3 and 10, weren't hurt by the lead hazards found at her home. Before the Greater Rochester Health Foundation paid for painting the exterior, rebuilding the front porch and installing vinyl replacement windows, Fraguada-Ortiz was vacuuming window sills and mopping almost every other day, for a year and a half. "It's draining," said Fraguada-Ortiz, a consumer credit counselor.

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