

# Protecting Children's Health

## Fighting The Most Preventable Environmental Disease Affecting Children

(NAPSA)—Many people are surprised to learn that, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), childhood lead poisoning is the nation's most common preventable environmental health problem. The numbers of children affected are decreasing, but there is still much communities can do both to eliminate lead hazards and to prevent children's exposure to them.

Elevated blood lead levels in children, especially under the age of six, can put them at greater risk of learning disabilities and behavioral problems. Children with extremely high blood lead levels may suffer from seizures, comas and even death.

Poor and minority children living in low income neighborhoods are disproportionately affected. Approximately one in five African-American children living in housing built before 1946 has elevated blood lead levels. The CDC estimates that 85 percent of children with lead poisoning are Medicaid eligible, meaning they live in or near poverty.

Communities can help combat childhood lead poisoning by encouraging their local and state governments to pursue solution-oriented programs. In cities such as Boston, Baltimore and Milwaukee, cities and their mayors are adopting aggressive screening and remediation programs, and enforcing effective rental housing laws. Boston Mayor Tom Menino has pledged to make his city Lead Safe by 2005, and other mayors will likely follow suit if their constituents make it a priority.

Last year, two prominent community leaders formed an organization dedicated to eliminating



**New federal funding is available for the elimination of lead hazards.**

lead hazards. Dr. Benjamin Hooks, former Executive Director and CEO of the NAACP, and Jack Kemp, Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) under President George H. W. Bush, brought their community and housing expertise to the effort and are encouraging action at the federal, state and local level.

Said Kemp, "Through an aggressive combination of education, testing and remediation we can—and will—be a lead-safe nation."

Recently, the Children's Health Forum helped secure a new federal grant program championed by Senators Kit Bond (R-MO) and Barbara Mikulski (D-MD) targeting the elimination of lead hazards in high-risk urban centers across the country. The \$50 million program, administered through HUD, represents an increase of almost 40 percent in federal resources targeted to lead hazard remediation.

Dr. Hooks emphasized that the grants will go directly to where

they are most needed and most effective, proactive programs in at-risk cities. "Now we need to encourage cities to take advantage of the available funding and launch or grow effective programs," Dr. Hooks said.

The new federal funding, expected to be announced in May 2003, will go to cities with the greatest number of pre-1940 units of rental housing and disproportionately high numbers of lead-poisoned children. Each qualifying city will receive a grant of \$2 to 4 million.

In addition to encouraging their local governments to take action and apply for federal grant funding, concerned parents can urge their state legislatures to pass and enforce laws that hold landlords accountable for repairing and preventing lead hazards, establish programs to educate tenants and homeowners about lead hazards and lead safety, and require at-risk children to have their blood screened for elevated blood lead levels.

Last year Rhode Island approved legislation holding landlords accountable if a child is poisoned by lead hazards on their property. Under this law, landlords can no longer claim ignorance as a defense against liability for children's health, and those who fail to take remedial action after being notified to do so will be identified on a public database and required to post signs on the properties declaring them unsafe for small children.

For more information about making their own homes lead safe, parents can call the National Lead Information Clearinghouse at 1-800-424-LEAD, or contact the health or housing department.