

At issue: Lead paint

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County must test homes before children move in.

At the recent Community Lead Summit, Rep. Louise Slaughter, D-Fairport, remarked, "The society as a whole first allowed toxic lead to be used in our homes, and so we all share in the responsibility for eliminating the hazards it creates."

This statement proves the value of government, which serves as a proxy when citizens cannot accomplish a task on their own.

In the case of lead-poisoning prevention, Monroe County government must play a primary role and must strive to be proactive. Otherwise, children will remain as lead-test kits.

That, unfortunately, has been the position of the Monroe County administration when it comes to detecting and remedying lead-paint poisoning in our homes.

Fortunately, after years of urging by the Coalition to Prevent Lead Poisoning, this policy may be changing.

Hats off to the coalition for its work in the community to increase awareness and action on this critical issue. The June 10 summit, spearheaded by the coalition, brought together city and county government officials to commit to policies designed to eliminate childhood lead poisoning.

County Executive Maggie Brooks pledged to take two concrete actions toward that end: She announced plans for a pilot program to determine how best to assure that families receiving county rent assistance have lead-safe housing. She also agreed to direct the county Health Department to retest formerly contaminated houses before a poisoned child is allowed back in.

This is certainly a step in the right direction, but it is only a start. Over the last eight years, the coalition and Democrats in the County Legislature have fought for a proactive county policy requiring testing of at-risk houses before families move in. We have called for the administration to act before a child tests positive for lead in the bloodstream.

A verbal commitment is insufficient when it comes to the health of our citizens. Still missing is Brooks' announcement that details of the pilot program have been hammered out, including a timeline and how the effectiveness of the program will be evaluated. In addition, a progress report should be made to the Legislature within three months of the program's start date, to keep officials and the public informed.

It is essential that the administration fleshes out and implements its commitments as soon as possible. Until it does so, the Health Department will still be required to check a house

for lead only after a child tests with a dangerous level of lead in the bloodstream.

In that event, if a child tests with a dangerous blood-lead level, the family would be relocated while the source of lead is removed from their home. But the corrective repairs would still only be inspected visually -not thoroughly - before the family moves back in, and the child may be exposed to even more lead.

The community cannot accept a verbal commitment when there is so much work to be done. As current county policy stands, children do not get help until after lead is found in their bloodstreams. In other words, our children are still the administration's lead-test kits.

The community must hold Maggie Brooks to her promises. With so much community collaboration and commitment, she now has an obligation and an opportunity to prove her conviction that new procedures are needed to combat lead poisoning.

Lee, a Democrat from Rochester, represents the 25th District in the Monroe County Legislature.