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CONTACT: Kate Philips
philips@parkerphilips.com
215.850.4647 | mobile

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The PA Department of Health Releases Two New Lead Reports

Harrisburg, PA (March 2, 2022) – The Pennsylvania Department of Health (DOH) recently released two new lead poisoning reports for the state of Pennsylvania: the Birth Cohort Report and the Childhood Lead Surveillance Report. The findings include data and statistics from 2017 to 2020.

One in three Pennsylvania children with Medicaid health insurance are not getting tested for lead poisoning before their second birthday, despite the required Medicaid testing. The [Birth Cohort report](#) covers all children born in Pennsylvania in 2017 and 2018 and shows how many of them were tested for lead poisoning before they turned two years old and the results of those tests.

“This report shows us that among the children tested, children with private health insurance are more likely to be tested than children with Medicaid (54% and 39% respectively) — even though Medicaid requires children to be tested at ages one (and two) and private insurance companies do not,” said Jeffrey R. Martin, MD, Chair of the Department of Family and Community Medicine at Penn Medicine Lancaster General Health and Co-chair of the Lead Free Promise Project. “We’ve got to remove barriers for health care providers and parents to get babies tested for lead. To actually prevent babies from being poisoned in the first place, we’ve got to test houses for lead paint and remove it when it’s found.”

The PA DOH released a second report — its annual [Childhood Lead Surveillance Report](#) — that covers data on children tested for lead poisoning in 2020. Tragically, this report shows that the rate of Pennsylvania children with elevated blood lead levels has remained essentially the same for the last two years at a rate of 4.65. This is a rate two times higher than children poisoned in Flint, Michigan, at the peak of the city’s crisis.

“There is no safe level of lead in a child’s body; exposure to lead, even at low levels, can cause intellectual, behavioral and academic deficits,” said Colleen McCauley, Health Policy Director at Children First, Co-Chair, PA Lead Free Promise Project. “We must do better for our children - lead poisoning is completely preventable. Now that the budget season is underway, we will continue to fight for our promise to children and ask the state legislature to create a \$40 million fund utilizing American Rescue Plan dollars to help families remediate homes, remove the lead and receive the services they need.”

The majority of children with elevated blood lead levels are White. Children who are Black and Hispanic disproportionately test positive for lead because they are more likely to live in older properties with deteriorated lead-based paint. In PA, more than four times more Black children and two times more Hispanic children are poisoned than White children – similar to the rates in 2019.

Lancaster County is among the top ten counties in the state with the highest number of children testing positive for lead (240 children), the Lead Surveillance Report shows. Yet fewer children are tested in Lancaster County than the state average (11.67% and 17.61% respectively). The Lead Free Families program run by Penn Medicine Lancaster General Health offers comprehensive services to address lead paint in homes to prevent lead paint poisoning and assist families with remediation services, testing and early intervention services.

“Since more than 70% of Pennsylvania homes were built before lead paint was banned, we haven’t even scratched the surface of those who may be affected,” said Dr. Martin. “We will continue to advocate to include early testing for all children not just those with state funded health care.”

Pennsylvania continues to lead the nation in lead exposure with having the second largest number of children testing positive for lead poisoning among states. The Lead-Free Promise Project, a coalition made up of more than 50 organizations that all support ending lead paint poisoning in Pennsylvania, applauds the Pennsylvania Department of Health’s efforts in taking steps to combat this issue that still affects over 8,000 PA children today.

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LFPP is part of ThrivingPA.com, a non-partisan, statewide campaign that seeks to improve the quality of and increase equitable access to a coordinated system of health supports, including access to comprehensive perinatal health services, children’s health insurance, nutrition supports and lead screening and abatement.