Buffalo Ranked as “Troubled Community” for Lead Exposure Levels

by John Szalasny  February 21, 2022, 8:11 am  0 Comments

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In a recent webinar hosted by the League of Conservation Voters, Mayor Byron Brown was part of a panel discussing the federal Build Back Better bill. Among the many programs in the infrastructure bill, Mayor Brown talked the provision to replace lead pipes and the City of Buffalo’s ROLL program. Cities with old infrastructure like Buffalo will have lead pipes, and ROLL – Replacing Old Lead Lines, covers the costs for a City of Buffalo residential property owner to replace a leaking or broken lead water service line that is not covered by their homeowner’s insurance.

You may now be asking yourself why would Mayor Brown be talking to people about lead pipes? It turns out that, contrary to the common perception, that infrastructure is more than roads and bridges. It also includes many services out of the public limelight like broadband service, electrical transmission, and water and sewage systems.

In 2015, the Flint, Michigan water crisis brought the issue of lead in our water supply out into the open. But this is not a new problem. Lead exposure is a problem that affected public health for at least 2000 years. It was used throughout the Roman Empire to make the pipes for plumbing (the word comes from the Latin word for lead “plumbum”). It was like the plastic of its day because it was stable, easily malleable and could be shaped into things like cups and plates, and was used in cosmetics and as a preservative. Like today’s issues with plastic, lead had its downside as lead poisoning was common among the Roman elite.

It’s been quite a while since anyone has eaten off a plate made of lead but it is still a legacy contaminant in our communities. If your home was built before 1978, it may have lead paint. If it was built prior to 1986, it is likely that you have lead in your water system, either in the pipes or the solder that connects the pipes. Leaded gasoline was available for your cars until 1996. But lead is not totally off the market. If you are an outdoor sportsman, lead is still available in many fishing line sinkers as well as ammunition for target shooting and hunting. So, although we have removed lead from our human homes, lead is still an issue for wildlife.

The issues in Flint were headline news, but you may be surprised to hear that the level of lead exposure is actually higher in Buffalo and Niagara Falls. A Reuters article, Unsafe at Any Level features Buffalo as a “Troubled Community” on their interactive lead levels map. They noted, “Buffalo, New York’s, old housing and high poverty create the perfect conditions for one of the worst childhood lead poisoning problems in the
country. In 17 city zip codes, the rate of tested children with high lead levels was double that of Flint.”

The title of the Reuters article refers to scientific evidence that there is no safe blood level, especially for children. It has been conjectured that problems in urban schools can be blamed on lead exposure. Exposure to lead causes irreversible developmental issues including damage to the brain and nervous system; slowed growth and development; learning and behavioral problems; hearing and speech problems. These can cause attention problems which lead to underperformance in school. New York State guidelines require that all children are screened for lead at ages one and two. If residing in pre-1978 housing, the law requires yearly screening to age 6. If your child is suffering from lead poisoning, your county’s Department of Health should offer a case management program to monitor lead levels and to help prevent your child from further exposure.

In addition to the effects on childhood development, there are long-term health effects including depression, distraction, forgetfulness, irritability and gastrointestinal issues (abdominal pain, nausea, constipation). Prolonged exposure can also put you at risk for fertility issues, high blood pressure, heart disease and kidney disease.

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This is why Mayor Brown was talking about lead pipes. As the leader of the city with the oldest housing stock in the country, Mayor Brown has a huge task ahead of him. But funding from President Biden’s Build Back Better bill will be a huge help in tackling the legacy of lead contamination in our city. For tips on what you can do to minimize the risks of lead exposure for you and your children, check out these tips from the Centers for Disease Control. You can also contact the City of Buffalo’s “Lead Line” to request to have your home or apartment tested for lead.

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