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Raising Physician Awareness to Reduce Childhood Lead Exposure: The Massachusetts Community Lead Progress Report

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Background

Massachusetts (MA) enacted one of the nation's first Lead Laws in the 1970’s. The law requires universal screening of children for lead poisoning multiple times before age 3, and the removal or covering of lead paint hazards in all homes built before 1978 where a child under 6 lives. The Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program (CLPPP) offers education, environmental inspections, and community health worker services. MA screening rates are high and the prevalence of lead poisoning has been steadily decreasing since 2000.

Despite these successes, there is wide variation in screening and prevalence rates at the community level, with some communities showing a need for a more targeted approach. In addition, recent scientific evidence has demonstrated the harmful effects of long-term low-level lead exposure, including damage to overall intellectual ability, speech and language, hearing, visual-spatial skills, attention, executive functions, social behavior, and fine and gross motor skills*.

There is no safe level of lead exposure and lead remains a significant health risk for children in Massachusetts.

The Childhood Lead Screening Community Progress Report

Pediatric physicians serve a critical role in preventing childhood lead exposure in their communities. The MA Department of Public Health has developed a direct mailing tool for physician outreach. It provides community-specific indicators of childhood lead screening and exposure, highlighting areas of needed improvement in physician screening, follow-up, and prevention. The progress report focuses on awareness of the CDC reference level of 5 µg/dL and the dangers of low-level lead exposure, educating physicians on their role in preventing lead exposure by screening all children, following proper blood lead testing practices, and educating parents on available resources.

Outreach Goals

Increase physician awareness of:
- CDC reference value and the dangers of low-level lead exposure
- High risk community status
- Physicians’ role in preventing exposure by educating parents
- Limitations of capillary blood lead tests and methods to improve test reliability

Performance measures:
- Increase screening rates
- Increase adherence to the screening schedule
- Increase the use of initial venous tests
- Increase venous confirmation testing for children with an initial capillary test of ≥5 µg/dL
- Decrease the incidence of blood lead levels ≥5 µg/dL

Evaluation

The progress report will be mailed annually to pediatric physicians in MA. A quantitative and qualitative evaluation will be completed using a random sample of physicians to assess knowledge and behavior before and after receiving the progress report. The evaluation will also seek recommendations from physicians for future outreach activities.

Contact and Resources

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Access the Community Lead Progress Report on the CLPPP Website: www.mass.gov/dph/clppp

Environmental Public Health Tracking Website: www.mass.gov/dph/matracking