

Interested Party Testimony for HB 96
Ohio House Finance Health Committee
By Fred Strahorn, Executive Director
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Chair Schmidt, Vice Chair Deeter, Ranking Member Somani and members of the Ohio House Health Committee, I am Fred Strahorn, Executive Director of the Ohio Healthy Homes Network and a member of the Ohio Lead Free Kids Coalition Leadership Team. Thank you for allowing me to provide testimony on House Bill 96, in particular the lead poisoning prevention elements of the budget.

The Ohio Healthy Homes Network (OHHN) is a network of grassroots and non-profit organizations that engage in work to promote healthy, safe and affordable housing throughout the state of Ohio. OHHN advocates for policy that improves the overall health and indoor environmental quality of Ohio families in areas such as lead poisoning, mold, radon, and more.

Today, I am here to testify in support of the funding in the budget to address issues of lead poisoning in the state of Ohio.

Lead-based paint and its dust are the most common source of lead poisoning. Lead was commonly added to interior and exterior paint in the United States and Europe for centuries. In 1978, the United States government banned the use of lead paint in residential settings. Though lead paint is not used today, it is still found in many homes built prior to 1978.

Lead is a naturally occurring element that can be found in water, air, soil and consumer products. Lead is hazardous to humans. Exposure to lead can result in poisoning when it accumulates in a person's bones and soft tissue. Lead poisoning can cause numerous health challenges, including abdominal pain, vision and hearing loss, seizures, cognitive and developmental delays, and behavioral changes.

Much of Ohio's housing stock was constructed before lead-based paint was prohibited. In fact, more than two-thirds of homes in Ohio were built before 1980. In Ohio's urban communities, there is an even greater concentration of older homes. Fifty-eight percent of homes in Ohio's urban cores were built before 1950.

While lead poisoning can affect individuals of all ages, children are at the greatest risk. Children's bodies absorb lead more efficiently than adults and they are less able than adults to detoxify their bodies of lead. As children crawl, they can collect lead dust on their hands which is then ingested when they touch their hands to their mouth. Infants and toddlers are also developmentally programmed for mouthing behavior. They learn new sensations, objects and experiences through hand-to-mouth and object-to-mouth behaviors. Children in this age group may consume lead paint that is peeling or chipping.

As we know, the majority of brain development occurs within the first 5 or 6 years of a child's life. If developmental damage occurs to the brain in that period that damage is permanent. This issue impacts efforts that the state is making in other areas such as developmental disability, education and poverty.

OHHN applauds the work of Governor DeWine and the General Assembly to address this issue in previous budgets and we are sensitive to the current budget pressures. However, there is significant cost associated with not addressing the problem over the long-term. These costs show up in the form of lost productivity, increased healthcare cost, increased criminal activity, etc. In Ohio, it is estimated that there are 3.5 million homes containing some type of lead hazard, over 427,000 of those homes are occupied with children under the age of 6, and roughly 200,000 of them are low-income families. Ohio has the second highest number of children testing positive for elevated blood lead levels in the country. This problem exists in every county in our state. The issue of lead poisoning of children in Ohio still registers as a crisis for the Ohio Healthy Homes Network and for the Ohio Lead Free Kids Coalition and we believe it is important to continue to find a way to make increased investments in this area because of the magnitude of the problem. OHHN urges funding for the Lead Abatement line-item at \$12 million in FY'26 and FY'27 so that the Ohio Department of Health can continue to protect children from lead poisoning.

One of the state's most important primary prevention tools is the SCHIP Lead Abatement Program. The SCHIP Lead Abatement Program currently allows for homes with lead hazards to be abated for Medicaid households with pregnant women or children eligible for Medicaid. Currently, the Director of OBM can transfer up to \$5 million dollars each fiscal year at the request of the Medicaid Director to be used for the SCHIP Lead Abatement Program. We are asking that the General Assembly increase the spending authority to allow for up to \$10 million dollars each fiscal year to be requested and transferred. There are currently 1100 lead hazard control orders requiring abatement and the program is still dealing with abating homes where kids have already been poisoned rather than abating properties before a child has been poisoned. Additional funding will allow the program to expand its reach to more communities and allow the state to focus more efforts on primary prevention.

Lastly, OHHN supports adopting language that would transfer the authority to administer the Repair, Renovation and Paint (RRP) rule from the federal government to the state of Ohio. The RRP rule is a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency rule that requires contracting firms to take common sense lead-safe precautions when performing work that would disturb lead paint which would expose residents or workers to lead dust. OHHN believes the Ohio Department of Health is better suited to work with local communities in Ohio to administer this rule.

Chair Schmidt, Vice Chair Deeter, Ranking member Somani and committee members, thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Health Committee and I would be happy to answer any questions.