



LEAD POISONING IN WESTERN NEW YORK

By Steven Haagsma

In 2014, the city of Flint, Michigan changed the source of its drinking water, and the resulting scandal made national headlines. One of the primary problems in the Flint water crisis was the lead poisoning experienced by children in the city. In areas most affected by lead in the water, the percentage of children tested for lead who were found to have elevated levels in their blood (above 5 micrograms per deciliter) rose from 4% to over 10%. A tragedy, to be sure. Both before and after the national media converged on Flint, Buffalo has been dealing with its own lead crisis. The Buffalo and Erie County Lead Safe Task Force has identified

In 12 different Buffalo-area zip codes, children experience lead poisoning at twice the rate of children in Flint, Michigan at the height of their water crisis

nine zip codes as “communities of concern” for lead exposure. In all nine of these zip codes, along with three others not identified by the Task Force, over 20% of children tested from 2005-2015 had elevated blood lead levels—twice that of the worst areas of Flint post-water crisis. Four of Buffalo’s zip codes (14208, 14211, 14212, and 14213) saw over 40% of children test for elevated blood lead levels—four times the rate of Flint. And while these numbers reflect blood lead levels exceeding five micrograms per deciliter, the CDC reports that “there is no known blood lead level for children without some level of risk for the adverse neurological effects of lead in children.” Exposure in Buffalo

is especially connected to the rental market, as the Lead Safe Task Force reports that over 80% of properties where children have been poisoned by lead are rental properties. Lead exposure is an enormous problem in Buffalo, and one that does not get the attention it deserves.

While lead exposure is not healthy for anyone, it is especially harmful to young children, and once in the bloodstream lead can lead to learning and behavioral problems. Studies have repeatedly demonstrated the link between lead exposure and school discipline and even crime rates. One study found that for each additional microgram of lead per deciliter of blood, the probability of being suspended from school increased by over 6% and the probability of being incarcerated at some point increased by 50%. Remember that in some zip codes in Buffalo, over 40% of children have blood lead levels of over 5 micrograms per deciliter, and some have much higher levels than that. Another study showed that homicide levels increased in cities that introduced lead water pipes in the early 20th century while remaining stable in similar cities that did not. Other studies have estimated that up to 90% of the nationwide reduction in crime since the 1990s is attributable

Children exposed to lead are more likely to be suspended from school and to be involved in the justice system as adults

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INSIGHT



HOME THROUGH THE YEARS: PART 2



By Steven Haagsma

As HOME celebrates its 60th anniversary in 2023, we want to look back at how we got here through a series of articles about our history. This story is part 2, with part 3 coming in the next issue of Insight!

In the late 1980s, HOME embarked on a process that would eventually grow the organization’s institutional capabilities and establish HOME’s first mobility program. The process began with an investigation into the Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority (BMHA), which at the time was actively segregating its public housing projects by race. Helped by a series of articles by Jim Heaney, at the time an investigative reporter with the Buffalo News, BMHA’s illegal practices were exposed. Heaney was nominated for a Pulitzer for the five-part series, which caught the attention of Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Secretary Jack Kemp. In 1988, HUD officially ruled that BMHA’s practices amounted to illegal segregation, and a years-long battle ensued to put an end to it.

It was not until 1992 that BMHA began implementing a plan intended to address their non-compliance with civil rights law. Assistant HUD Secretary Gordon Mansfield refused to commit

additional resources to fixing the mess at BMHA, so in addition to the housing authority’s plan, a federal lawsuit was required to force HUD to continue funding it, a suit that ultimately led to the creation of the Community Housing Center (CHC). The CHC was originally a 5-year program to assist renters with Section 8 Housing

“For the first time, HOME was able to create housing opportunities in addition to protecting people’s rights.”

Choice Vouchers in moving to less-segregated areas of Buffalo or Western New York, with the majority of the funding for the program coming from HUD. HOME was selected to run the CHC, expanding organizational capacity beyond simply enforcing fair housing law. For the first time, HOME was able to create housing opportunities in addition to protecting people’s rights.

The process was not without its own barriers to overcome, as the City of Buffalo failed to honor its part of the consent decree from the federal lawsuit, requiring HOME to return to federal court. After a ruling in HOME’s favor, the city was required to keep its promise to provide part of the funding for the CHC, but the city retaliated by cutting HOME’s funding in other areas. Throughout the entire decade-plus of this ordeal, Executive Director Scott Gehl was tireless in his determination to

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make things right and continue the battle to reduce segregation in Western New York.

While the CHC funding in the original settlement expired after 5 years, HOME was able to continue the program over the following decades through various funding sources. HOME's mobility services have since undergone multiple renamings (currently the Making Moves Program), but we still provide assistance to voucher holders when they want to move to areas with greater opportunities than where they currently reside. Over the past two and a half decades, thousands of families have benefitted from the CHC and its successor programs and thousands more have benefitted from the improvements made at BMHA as a result of HOME's efforts.

INCOME REQUIREMENTS AND THEIR IMPACT ON HOUSING CHOICE VOUCHER HOLDERS

By Olivia Carl



In 2019, New York State amended the Human Rights Law to make it unlawful to discriminate in housing on the basis of an individual's source of income. There are many lawful sources of income, including Section 8 or any other type of voucher, other forms of public assistance, social security benefits, child support, alimony, or foster care subsidies.

While the passage of this law made it illegal for housing providers to discriminate in housing due to an individual's source of income, many people still face unreasonable barriers when looking to secure housing. One such barrier is a housing provider's use of income requirements as part of their tenant-screening process. Oftentimes, housing providers will have a policy where an applicant must make a certain amount of income to qualify for a unit. A common income policy is to require applicants to make at least 3 times the rent amount each month in income to qualify. For example, if the rent is \$1,000 a month, an applicant must make at least \$3,000 a month to qualify for that unit.

While this is legal, the New York State Division of Human Rights makes clear that housing providers cannot set *unreasonable* income formulas or wealth requirements for subsidized tenants.

For housing providers that are looking to employ a minimum income policy, they must have an alternative policy for applicants or tenants with housing choice vouchers or other forms of rental assistance. This ensures that individuals with rental assistance are given the same opportunity to rent and live at the housing of their choice. Unreasonable income requirements place an extreme burden on low-income individuals; many would not even qualify for rental assistance if they were to make enough to

The creation of the CHC was just the first step in the expansion of HOME's services. More recently, HOME has more than doubled the number of full-time staff employed since before the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, growing the size of all departments—mobility, investigations/enforcement, and education. While the need for fair housing services is unfortunately as great as ever, HOME's ability to address these needs has grown, beginning with the victory in the BMHA case, fought hard over nearly a decade. Now, as we celebrate our 60th year of fighting for fair housing, we continue to look to the future while also celebrating our past. We hope you will continue to support us in our important work. ▲▲▲▲▲

meet a housing provider's income requirement.

If your policy is to require applicants to make 3 times the monthly rent in income, subsidized renters must only be required to meet that requirement for *their share of the rent*.

Let's use the same example as above. If the rent is \$1,000 a month, and the policy in place is to have the applicant make 3 times the rent in income each month to qualify for the unit, an applicant without rental assistance would need to make \$3,000 a month in income. Housing choice voucher holders may only be paying a portion of the rent each month. If the voucher covers \$600 of the rent each month, the voucher holder would be responsible for paying the rest of the rent, or \$400 in this case. In this scenario, voucher holders should only be required to make 3 times \$400 in rent each month, or \$1,200 a month, instead of \$3,000.

HOME works with members of the community who face this very issue on a day-to-day basis. One community member reports that she has been looking for safe and secure housing since January of 2022, but has been met with countless housing providers who require her to meet an income requirement of 3 times the rent. Even by adding her voucher amount to her monthly income, she still would not qualify for that amount. This is why housing providers must recognize that applicants only need to meet 3 times *their tenant share* of the rent each month. Without having this alternative, this policy has the potential to exclude populations with rental subsidies and prevent them from living in the housing of their choice.

If you have been denied housing due to an unreasonable income requirement, please contact HOME at 716-854-1400 or info@homeny.org. ▲▲▲▲▲

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to lead being removed from gasoline and paint beginning in the 1970s, although the exact number is disputed. Part of the explanation for these types of findings is that lead poisoning reduces children's ability to consider the future consequences of their actions. It also reduces children's cognitive abilities and their ability to pay attention, leading to academic problems in school in addition to behavioral ones. It is abundantly clear that lead exposure is nothing short of an emergency in Western New York. While it is not widely treated that way, there are individuals and organizations focusing on the issue.

In the state legislature, there are two bills with strong support from local lawmakers that would address the issue. The first, a proposal that would prohibit insurance companies from refusing to cover losses related to lead exposure, passed the Assembly in April and is currently in committee in the state Senate. The passage of this bill would likely cause property owners to take lead more seriously—being forced to pay up for insurance premiums to cover lead exposure in their properties would be the alternative. The Assembly version of this bill (A1687) was sponsored by Jonathan Rivera, whose 149th district covers parts of Buffalo and Lackawanna along with the Town of Hamburg. The Senate version of the bill (S88) also has a local sponsor in Sean Ryan, whose 61st district covers much of the northern half of Buffalo and northern Erie County.

The second state bill, the Lead-Based Paint Disclosure Act (A4820/S2353) would require property owners to conduct lead paint tests and provide the tests' results to the Department of Health and to potential buyers and tenants before selling or leasing the property, giving state health officials and potential buyers and tenants the knowledge of which properties do and do not have lead paint hazards. The Senate version of this bill is co-sponsored by Ryan and Tim Kennedy, who between them represent the entirety of the City of Buffalo, while in the Assembly the bill is

ON AUGUST 19TH, WE WARMLY INVITE FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS TO OUR 5TH ANNUAL COMMUNITY BBQ!

The event is from 12-3pm and will be held at our 1542 Main Street location in the parking lot. Additional parking can also be found across the street courtesy of Willoughby Insurance Company.

There will be entertainment from Jim the Balloon Guy, face painting, and more. Music will be provided by DJ King Shad. The Erie County Mobile Library will be present and will allow users to borrow and return books, listen to audiobooks, use laptop computers, and sign up for a library card. There will also be an appearance from your favorite superheroes from the Justice League of WNY.

sponsored by Rivera and co-sponsored by Majority Leader Crystal Peoples-Stokes, who represents much of the East Side in her 141st district.

While neither of these bills has become law yet, it is promising that local representatives are aware of the problem lead poses to Buffalo and Western New York and are working to address the issue.

While additional legislative solutions have not yet become reality, there are resources available to renters, landlords, and homeowners in Western New York to address lead in their homes. The Buffalo and Erie County Lead Safe Task Force maintains a website, GetAheadOfLead.org, that compiles many of these resources. These

resources include educational information for families and caregivers about getting your children screened for lead and how to keep your family safe if there is lead in or around your home. There are also resources for landlords or homeowners, including access to certification courses for renovation, repair, and painting (RRP) to be able to safely address lead issues in properties, how to have your property inspected for lead, and lead remediation grant and loan programs.

Lead exposure harms individuals, but the consequences affect whole communities, as entire school cohorts of students struggle with its effects and grow into adults whose potential has been stunted by this toxin that we have the power to address. Buffalo likes to call itself the City of Good Neighbors but to truly live up to that moniker, we need to treat lead exposure experienced by our neighbors' children as if it happened to our own. Resources are out there, but more progress is needed. This is a citywide emergency, and only by treating it as such and banding together as a city can we put an end to the scourge that is lead poisoning.

For more information about lead and the resources available to address it, go to GetAheadOfLead.org. ▲▲▲▲▲

Over 80% of properties in Buffalo where children have been exposed to lead are rental properties



Free food and beverages will be provided, as well as popcorn, cotton candy, and snow cones. This will truly be a family affair!

For more information, please contact Wendy Mednick at 716-854-1400, ext. 22.

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Q&A HOME'S NEWEST TEAM ADDITIONS

What did you do before you came to HOME?

What excites you about working for HOME?

What hobbies or interests do you have outside of work?

MARIA MARINUCCI DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS

Prior to coming to HOME, I worked in higher education, most recently overseeing a women's center and multicultural center, and working on strategic diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice initiatives. Prior to that, I worked in college/university housing. Following a family relocation to the Buffalo area, I was excited about the opportunity to explore different ways to serve my community and HOME and this role are a perfect fit for what I was hoping I could do!

So much excites me about working for HOME! What first drew me in was the ability to contribute to a team that is both meeting immediate needs by supporting folks in finding and securing safe and affordable housing, as well as working more broadly to address, eliminate, and prevent housing discrimination. I love having the opportunity to help make Western New York an even better place to call home.

I love to cook and bake, and be outside—whether that is running, kayaking, or going on hikes (or playing in the snow during the winter!), I enjoy exploring the area by being active!

CIERRA FIELDS CONTENT & EDUCATION SPECIALIST

Before coming to HOME, I was a stay at home parent for six years. Prior to that, I was a Real Estate legal assistant at a law firm in Williamsville.

One of my main objectives in returning to the workforce was finding a job that actually made a difference in the community. I wanted to work for a company that was actively helping people and making an impact. HOME fit those qualifications and more! As a Content & Education Specialist, I feel like I am letting the community know about the resources and services that are available to them in creative ways via our social media platforms.

I am an avid reader. It is my number one hobby! Besides that I usually can be found chasing my three kids around the house with my husband, binge watching shows on Netflix, and spending time with my friends.