



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
**September 22, 2016**

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## **Kent County Board of Commissioners Form Lead Poisoning Task Force**

**GRAND RAPIDS, MI** – The City of Flint made the headlines over the past year due to lead in the water. Right here in Kent County, public health concerns over lead have been ongoing for years. The Kent County Board of Commissioners this morning approved forming a Lead Task Force to investigate the issue and seek solutions.

The Lead Task Force includes more than a dozen community leaders, as well as health and housing specialists. They are being asked by Board Chair Jim Saalfeld to (i) identify the contributing environmental factors of lead-based exposure and illness in Kent County; (ii) investigate possible interventions (actions, policies, and programs designed to reduce lead-based exposure and illness); and (iii) make a formal report and recommendations to the community.

One zip code in Grand Rapids led the state for the highest number of lead-poisoned children in 2015 according to the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services: 49507 (south of Franklin, east of US-131, north of 28th Street). Four out of five homes in Grand Rapids, and nearly three out of five homes in Kent County, were built before 1978, the year lead was banned from paint.

“What we are likely seeing in Kent County is lead exposure from lead-based paint and lead-contaminated dust in older buildings, lead in soil, and even lead in the workplace that is accidentally transferred,” said Jim Saalfeld, Chair of the Kent County Board of Commissioners. “We know that early intervention is critical. My hope is this task force can thoroughly examine this problem and make recommendations that will help our community reduce the number of children poisoned by lead, and perhaps be a model of prevention and remediation for other communities throughout the State of Michigan.”

Lead poisoning can cause permanent, irreversible damage to many organs, including the heart, brain, and liver. It’s also linked to lower IQs, hyperactivity, and aggressive behavior. The CDC estimates that nearly half a million children in the US have elevated blood lead levels (a blood lead level of 5 micrograms per deciliter or higher). “While we’ve made tremendous improvement over the past two decades reducing the percentage of children with elevated blood lead levels, the problem still exists and there is more work to be done,” said Adam London, Administrative Health Officer of the Kent County Health Department. “I look forward to working with this group of leaders to really have an impact on this public health issue.”

“With hundreds of Kent County children identified each year as having harmful levels of lead in their blood, my hope is that our group will help ensure a continued and effective rapid response system for poisoned kids,” said Paul Haan, Executive Director of the Healthy Homes Coalition of West Michigan and Lead Task Force Member. “I also hope that our Task Force will develop solutions that address hazards before kids are poisoned. If we only respond to lead poisoned children, we are stuck chasing the ball downhill and we will

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never end this problem. To succeed, we need to get out in front of the ball and get rid of sources of lead in the environment before children are harmed.”

Several Kent County departments work closely with the City of Grand Rapids, the Healthy Homes Coalition, LINC Community Revitalization and the Rental Property Owners Association to respond to the high childhood lead poisoning levels in specific neighborhoods in Grand Rapids. Members of the Lead Task Force include:

- CHAIR - Shana Shroll, Vice Chair of the Kent County Board of Commissioners and Chair of the Kent County Community Health Advisory Council
- VICE CHAIR - Senita Lenear, City Commissioner, City of Grand Rapids
- Emily Brieve, County Commissioner
- Carol Hennessy, County Commissioner
- Dan Koorndyk, County Commissioner
- Jon O'Connor, City Commissioner, City of Grand Rapids
- Cameron Van Wyngarden, Township Superintendent, Plainfield Charter Township
- Amna Seibold, Mayor, City of East Grand Rapids
- Dr. Ken Fawcett, Spectrum Health Healthier Communities
- Shannon Wilson, Grand Rapids African American Health Institute
- Paul Haan, Director of Healthy Homes Coalition of West Michigan
- Julie Rietberg, Grand Rapids Association of Realtors
- Adam London, Administrative Health Officer, Kent County Health Department
- Connie Bohatch, Director of Community Services, City of Grand Rapids
- Rebecca Rynbrandt, Director of Community Services, City of Wyoming
- Matthew VanZetten, Acting Director of Community Development and Housing, Kent County

About ten subject matter experts will also be involved with the Task Force, which will begin meeting in October and hopes to have a report complete by no later than the end of 2017.

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