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State Says 9,325 Children Under 6 Were Poisoned By Lead— But Only 18.5% Were Even Tested in 2017

Despite heightened national anxiety over childhood lead poisoning, Pennsylvania makes little progress protecting children, or even understanding the full extent of the health crisis

PHILADELPHIA (February 20, 2019) – Released in December, Pennsylvania’s Childhood Lead Surveillance report, which is critical to the strategic deployment of health resources, shows that the number of children poisoned annually remains hauntingly consistent, significant undertesting creates massive blind spots in the data, and that the Commonwealth must improve how it reports what data it has, according to new analyses from Public Citizens for Children and Youth.

For children under two years old, the critical cohort most vulnerable to unrecoverable neurological damage due to toxic lead, the PA Department of Health disclosed that 3,816 children tested positive for lead poisoning in 2017 and 1% more children were tested in 2017 than the previous year. But with less than 30% of total children under two years old tested, the full picture of childhood lead poisoning remains obscured.

Murkier still is the bigger picture for all children under six, 9,325 of whom were identified as poisoned in 2017, compared to 9,879 in 2016 and 9,643 in 2015. Again, with only 18.5% of under six children having been screened, undertesting means the Commonwealth is likely underestimating the true scope of this health crisis.

For the second consecutive year, Pennsylvania has the second most children poisoned by lead in the country. Of the top 10 states with the most children poisoned, Pennsylvania ranks second worst for testing, according to *Getting the Reporting Right: Improving PA’s Lead Poisoning Surveillance Data Sharing*, a new report released today by the child advocacy organization serving Southeastern PA.

“We know how to prevent childhood lead poisoning and spare children from terrible harm, just as we know those same efforts will save the state millions of dollars in health care, early intervention, special education, and juvenile justice services,” said Colleen McCauley, Health Policy Director for PCCY. “Better data will help build the public and political will for change.”

Top findings in *Getting the Reporting Right* for improving the state's collection and reporting of data include:

- Revealing whether health care providers are following Center for Disease Control and Prevention's lead screening protocol; indicate whether the state is in compliance with the legal mandate to appropriately screen children on Medicaid and CHIP
- Collecting and reporting data on the incidence of lead poisoning by race (PA DOH only know the race of children in 45% of the tests administered)
- Presenting data regarding the Commonwealth's largest cities, where an overwhelming share of poisoned children and children at risk for lead poisoning live (the latest surveillance report omitted this information)
- Summarizing and comparing data to inform policy makers and gauge Pennsylvania's progress.

"We commend State officials on their efforts to show the public what they know about children poisoned by lead," said Colleen McCauley, Health Policy Director at PCCY. "But we remain deeply concerned that there remains much we don't know, like whether the highest risk kids on Medicaid and CHIP are being tested as mandated by the federal government. If every child counts, that should be reflected in this winnable fight against childhood lead poisoning."

REPORT LINK:

Download *Getting the Reporting Right: Improving PA's Lead Poisoning Surveillance Data Sharing* at www.pccy.org/leadreportingdatasharing

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