

May 1, 2020

Hon. Bill de Blasio,
Mayor of the City of New York

Hon. Corey Johnson,
Speaker of the New York City Council

Jumaane Williams,
Public Advocate of New York City

Hon. Mark Levine,
Chair, Health Committee

Hon. Scott Stringer,
New York City Comptroller

Hon. Robert Cornegy,
Chair, Housing and Buildings Committee

Hon. Alicka Ampry-Samuel,
Chair, Public Housing Committee

A call to preserve funding for New York City's Child Lead Poisoning Prevention Programs

The undersigned individuals and organizations have been deeply involved, some of us for decades, in advocacy to end the scourge of childhood lead poisoning in New York City. While New York has made great strides over the years in reducing childhood lead poisoning, this battle is far from won, and we are concerned that the City's programs pertaining to lead poisoning prevention could be adversely affected by budget modifications or cuts as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

There are a number of reasons why the Covid-19 pandemic will have an adverse impact on our efforts to end lead poisoning. As a threshold matter, the consequence of "stay at home" orders and school closures is children are spending significantly more time indoors in unsafe housing and thus higher exposure to lead-based paint hazards. In addition, the ability of landlords to perform ongoing self-inspections for lead hazards, and for HPD and DOHMH to do statutorily-mandated inspections in response to tenant complaints or reports of children with elevated blood lead levels (EBLL) has been severely curtailed.

Similarly, the ability of landlords and City agencies to perform lead hazard controls and abatements has been hampered (and given the current shortage of personnel protection equipment as a result of the crises, there may be further delays in safely accomplishing repairs), leading to increased exposure. Moreover, it can be anticipated that increasing numbers of tenants and homeowners will resort to making interim repairs without proper safe work practices and dust testing. And while in the past lead poisoning has much more heavily affected low-income families, under the current conditions we can expect that lead poisoning will increase across all income levels. With the Governor now permitting a restart of construction work, even while many people are sheltering at home, the opportunities for exposure to lead dust may only increase.

Lastly, as reported in the New York Times on April 23, 2020, there has been a massive drop in regular well-child visits since the Covid-19 pandemic began. As a result, we understand that blood lead testing is down by 80% in New York City.

Thus, it can be expected that there will be an explosion of cases of children with EBLL once screening resumes, both due to the backlog of testing and as well the increased exposures for the reasons indicated above.

If anything, the current Covid-19 crisis has sadly illustrated that short-sightedness in public health efforts can have profound adverse consequences to society, far beyond direct impacts on those who require these services. With DOHMH staff already working at maximum capacity due to the Covid-19 crisis, that agency will need to be fully funded to meet its obligations to protect the public from lead poisoning, and HPD's primary prevention role likewise needs to be fully funded.

City and State leaders must consider not only how to address the impacts of COVID-19 today, but also how to ameliorate its impacts in the future and ensure children and families are able to recover. We urge elected leaders to assess the added threat of lead exposure created by COVID-19, and to develop a plan to address and remediate the surge in lead poisoning cases that are likely to occur as a result of this pandemic.

Thank you.

Signed,

Matthew J. Chachère, Northern Manhattan Improvement Corp.

Children's Defense Fund – New York

Citizens' Committee for Children of New York

Clean and Healthy New York

Cooper Square Committee

Cordell Cleare, New York City Coalition to End Lead Poisoning

Earthjustice

Emily A. Benfer, Director, Health Justice Advocacy Clinic, Visiting Associate Clinical Professor
of Law, Columbia Law School

Healthy Schools Network

Dr. Morri Markowitz, Lead Poisoning Specialist

New York Lawyers for the Public Interest

New York League of Conservation Voters

Jill Samuels, Lead Administrator

Tenants Political Action Committee

WE ACT for Environmental Justice

Cc: Health Commissioner Oxiris Barbot

HPD Commissioner Louise Carroll

Andrew Faciano, Exec. Dir., DHMH Healthy Housing Program