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Valerie Puryear

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LOYOLA HOSTS FORUM EXPLORING LEAD POISONING

By Valerie Puryear

Valerie Puryear is a second year, part-time student at Loyola U. Chicago School of Law.

When I began working on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's lead project in June 2001, I held a common misperception about what lead poisoning is and whom it affects. Like many people, I thought lead poisoning occurred when little children in low-income housing ate paint chips from peeling baseboards and windowsills.

Eight months later, I am conscious of the lead products that infiltrate my daily life: lead weights in the gym; lead seals in some foreign-made, canned food; and lead paint on the back stairwell in my apartment building. I am continually amazed at how lead filters into so many different parts of our lives, how insidious the problem is, and how little so many communities know about a problem that negatively affects so many of their children.

Because of the silent nature of lead poisoning and its far-reaching effect on so many Chicago children, it was decided that Loyola University Chicago's third Forum on the Child should be a community-focused event.¹ The idea was to bring together the members of several different communities affected by lead poisoning so they could bridge their ideas and resources into a workable solution to the lead problems in their communities. The Forum was intended to be a working conference that would lead to workable solutions for each community.

One of the most difficult aspects of planning the Forum was deciding which communities to invite to participate. All of Chicago is considered high risk, and there are many communities with overwhelming lead problems. But there was an understanding that the Forum could only focus on a few communities if we were to be successful in creating future action plans. In the end, Austin, North Lawndale, and Rogers Park were selected.

Each of these communities has a unique lead problem. While Austin has probably had the greatest number of organized efforts in Chicago to address the problem of lead poisoning, its rate of childhood lead poi-

soning is higher than the city average of 20%. Approximately 35% of children in Austin screened for lead were reported to have lead levels at or greater than 10 µg/dL. North Lawndale primarily consists of single-family homes, but the owners often cannot afford to correct the lead problems. The community also suffers from a serious housing shortage, which sometimes means people will live wherever they can find space, even if it is not lead safe. The short distance between Austin and North Lawndale also made these two communities obvious choices because work done in either of these two communities often affects the other. In general, Rogers Park has fewer lead-poisoned children than many other areas in Chicago. However, rehabilitation work in the community means homeowners sometimes unknowingly poison their own children when they are unaware of the lead hazards in the home they are rehabilitating. In addition, the large immigrant population in Rogers Park and the fear of eviction on the part of many tenants results in reluctance by many Rogers Park residents to pursue lead paint problems.

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The variety of representatives from different community groups that we were able to draw together for the Forum was a testament to both the extent of the

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lead problem in these communities as well as to the number of people concerned about the problem. We brought together about 75 people, including doctors, lawyers, housing inspectors, housing advocates, professors, students, university representatives, nurses and other health professionals, representatives from community centers, church representatives, and lead safety advocates. There was a broad range of knowledge levels and a wide span of interests in varying aspects of lead poisoning.

To put everyone on the same page, we wrote a brief research paper and handed it out at the conference.² The research paper looked at the sources and extent of the lead problem generally, the extent of the lead problem in each of the three communities, the efforts already taking place in the communities, and model efforts taking place in other communities.

Forum speakers also were chosen in order to give an overview of different aspects of lead poisoning and to get the group thinking about effective ways to tackle the lead problems in their communities. Speakers included Dr. Helen Binns of Children's Memorial Hospital, who discussed "Why Worry About Childhood Lead Poisoning?". Anne Evens of the Chicago Department of Public Health discussed the Department's efforts to address the problem of lead poisoning through innovative activities. Ralph Scott of the Alliance to End Childhood Lead Poisoning discussed preventive steps that must be taken to eradicate this threat to children's health in his talk on "The Role of Advocacy and Communities in Addressing Childhood Lead Poisoning."

During the afternoon session, each community gathered to develop a strategic plan for addressing the problem. I sat in on the Rogers Park session. After months of work to plan the conference, it was intriguing to hear the different relationship each person had with lead poisoning in his or her community. For example, after so many months of focus on the evils of lead in older housing, some of the housing inspectors were able to provide the point-of-view of the landlords they work with who struggle to improve their buildings while fighting rising costs.

Since the Forum, we have been working with each of the three communities to continue building action plans to combat the lead problem. Each has made

unique strides that match the unique nature of the lead problem in the community. The three communities are focusing on projects that primarily deal with prevention – removing the lead from the home before the child is poisoned. One community will be focusing its efforts on a ten-block area composed of two-flat and single-family homes. Other communities are discussing potential projects, including: creating a registry of lead-safe housing that local residents can refer to when looking for somewhere to live; involving local high schools by teaching students about lead-safe housing; having the Chicago Department of Public Health conduct training sessions on mitigation for community residents; and adding mitigation training and screening to summer fairs and schools' parent nights.

It is undeniable that lead poisoning is a persistent problem throughout Chicago. But these community groups are tackling the problem one apartment, one house, one family, and one child at a time. It is an excellent lesson for a future lawyer like myself that change happens by bringing together communities, pooling resources, and solving a problem one step at a time.

In the Austin neighborhood of Chicago, the rate of childhood lead poisoning is higher than the city average of 20%. Approximately 35% of children in Austin screened for lead were reported to have lead levels at or greater than 10 µg/dL.

¹ The University's Forum on the Child is a biennial exploration of interdisciplinary issues confronting children. The 1997 and 1999 Forums on the Child used a traditional conference model for exploring issues affecting urban children and the role of public policy in responding to children's needs.

² The paper, "Children in a Toxic World: A Working Paper on Community Efforts to End Childhood Lead Poisoning," is available through Loyola University ChildLaw Center, 16 E. Pearson, Chicago, Illinois 60611, or 312-915-6482, or aweinbe@luc.edu.