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City pushes lead abatement

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Dispatch Medical Reporter

As tiny Alexis Wiseman napped and played, her mother worked to make a better home for her new baby.

Stripping old wallpaper and paint, Wendy Wiseman was looking forward to rehabilitating her South Side home.

"I just started stripping the walls," she said. "I never thought twice about it."

She didn't know her baby was being poisoned by dust from lead-based paint in the process.

Holding Alexis -- now healthy and almost 2 -- Wiseman was happy to join Columbus Mayor Michael B. Coleman and other officials yesterday in announcing a new program to add \$300,000 a year into lead-poisoning prevention for the next 15 years.

The money will pay for \$100,000 in lead-abatement grants to remove hazardous paint from older homes, and the rest will go to blood tests and lead-poisoning educational materials.

The abatement money, expected to help as many as 20 homeowners a year, will be targeted to low-income families, like the \$1.2 million in federal money the city already gets for lead abatement.

The \$200,000 for screening and education will be added to \$100,000 that comes in from the national Centers for Disease Control each year, city Health Commissioner Bill Myers said.

The money is being shifted from the Columbus Division of Water, which will use a cheaper method of testing for lead and maintaining low lead levels in the water during the next three years.

The shift was approved by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which sees the trade-off as a benefit to residents facing more threat from lead-based paint than lead in the water, said Betsy Shaw, director of the office of environmental policy innovation for the agency.

The project is one of 43 nationwide aimed at allowing cities to look for more beneficial ways to use environmental dollars.

Children and developing fetuses absorb lead more readily than adults. Once in the body, lead finds its way to blood, tissue and bones and can cause brain damage, stunted growth, hyperactivity, learning problems and even death.

The most common source of lead poisoning is paint produced before 1978. Children in homes built that year or earlier are at greatest risk.

Inner-city children have the highest incidence of lead poisoning because many homes in those areas are not well-maintained, said Gary Garver, program director for Lead Safe Columbus.

"The poorer the neighborhood, the higher the incidence," he said.

Wiseman said the help she got from the Columbus Health Department -- from giving Alexis a blood test to helping with grant money to removing the lead from her home -- was wonderful.

Alexis' lead level, once at a dangerous classification of 22, is now a much safer eight, said Pam Young, a nurse with the Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program.

The girl was treated with a diet high in calcium and iron. She is sleeping in her mother's room, which has a low lead level, until the lead abatement is finished.

For more information about lead poisoning, call 800-424- LEAD or visit www.epa.gov/lead.