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Lead Task Force Presents Report, Recommendations to Board

GRAND RAPIDS, MI – While the national spotlight focused on the City of Flint due to lead in the water, Grand Rapids has been addressing the highest elevated blood lead levels in the State for several years – even higher than Flint. The causes are different – water in Flint, paint in older homes in Grand Rapids and Kent County – but the outcomes are still daunting. The Kent County Board of Commissioners' Lead Task Force was formed by Chair Jim Saalfeld in 2016. After much investigation, the Board received their final report this morning.

Recent data from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) shows 615 children in Kent County had Elevated Blood Lead Levels (EBLLs) in 2016. The data also shows a 40 percent increase in lead-poisoned children in the 49507 ZIP code (south of Franklin, east of US-131, north of 28th Street) during the past two years. The data indicates that more children had elevated blood lead levels in 49507 than the entire city of Flint during the Flint water crisis. 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. "I am encouraged by the work of this task force and the recommendations they have given this Board," said Jim Saalfeld, Chair of the Kent County Board of Commissioners. "The recommendations are specific, attainable and timely. If we can eliminate the cause of lead poisoning from the homes where our children live and play, Kent County can be a model of prevention and remediation for other communities."

The Lead Task Force heard from specialists in housing, healthcare and child care, as well as community leaders from areas hardest hit by lead. "This report is really a starting point for something greater," said Senita Leneer, Grand Rapids Third Ward City Commissioner. We know there is a lot more work to be done, because the community deserves lead-free homes to live in, which is why the members of the Task Force are committed to seeing the recommendations through to completion."

The members had a chance to meet with Lt. Governor Brian Calley, who worked closely with officials in Flint after their water crisis. "We wanted to be sure to hear from a variety of experts who have years of experience in dealing with lead poisoning," said Task Force Chair and Kent County Commissioner Emily Brieve. "Their knowledge and expertise were critical as we formed our recommendations."

The Lead Task Force recommends the Board of Commissioners immediately take these actions:

- Charge the Kent County Community Health Advisory Committee (CHAC) to work with stakeholders to develop plans by June 30, 2018, for how the community can work toward fulfilling this report's recommendations.
- Charge CHAC to review EBLLs, monitor progress on this report's recommendations, and update the community at least once a year.
- Encourage State of Michigan officials to implement recommendations made by the Governor's Child Lead Poisoning Elimination Board in its November 2016 report, *A Roadmap to Eliminating Child Lead Exposure*.

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The Lead Task Force grouped its proposed objectives into four categories:

- **Public education:** Begin with a comprehensive public education campaign about lead exposure risks and mitigations. This should reach the whole community, including rental property owners and real estate agents, owners, renters, buyers, medical providers, building permit officials, hardware stores, churches, refugee resettlement agencies, and other community-based organizations.
- **Policy:** Work with many government units, organizations, and programs to identify model ordinances and regulatory strategies that prevent and address lead hazards. The goal is to leverage and coordinate resources to test environments for lead, eliminate lead, test all children—and monitor progress—so we end childhood lead exposure.
- **Risk identification and elimination:** Explore every way to invest in lead risk assessment and abatement. Create a public access data system, so residents can share information on lead in soil, water, and homes. Partner with rental property owners, real estate agents, and contractors on ways to prevent and eliminate lead hazards — without displacing those who can least afford it. Offer training to many groups, from government employees and municipal water suppliers to childcare providers and residents, so more people know how to identify lead hazards.
- **Healthcare:** Encourage medical providers to test all children at 9 to 12 months and 24 to 36 months. Collect venous samples within a month of discovering EBL. Work with home health visitors, home healthcare providers, and health insurers to educate expecting and new parents about lead risk factors. Use community-based strategies to increase testing. Gather and share more and better demographic data. Find ways for insurance companies to incentivize providers for using lead screening questionnaires and testing children’s blood for lead.

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). “This a starting point, and we know there is far more work to be done,” said Adam London, Administrative Health Officer of the Kent County Health Department. “This group is dedicated to making sure the issue of lead stays in the forefront and that we don’t become complacent in addressing change. We will work to have a greater impact on this public health issue.”

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. The complete report is posted at www.accessKent.com/lead.

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