

Getting Ahead of Lead in Western New York


Convergence
Partnership

PolicyLink

August 2021



PolicyLink serves as the program director for the Convergence Partnership, helping to develop and implement the plans and actions necessary to ensure that all people can live in healthy communities of opportunity.

In 2018 the Convergence Partnership provided grants to seven organizations to advocate for solutions that create equitable changes for diverse communities across the country. These profiles include stories that capture the experiences and impacts of this work from the perspectives of the community members, grassroots and community organizations, and funder partners involved.

PolicyLink is a national research and action institute advancing racial and economic equity by **Lifting Up What Works**®.

www.policylink.org

The Problem with Lead

Buffalo, New York, is among the top 10 cities nationally for the prevalence of elevated blood-lead levels in young children. Regardless of the exact source of lead, exposure in young children can cause permanent memory loss, hearing loss, developmental delays, learning disabilities, and behavioral disorders.

Narrowly speaking, the major cause of lead poisoning in the city is lead-based paint, found in virtually all houses built before 1978, when lead was banned. A staggering 93 percent of homes in Buffalo were built before 1978. Dust from degraded lead paint can end up on children's hands and in their mouths, starting a slow and invisible poisoning. Lead also appears in some water lines and other places.

But lead poisoning does not affect all communities equally. It's no coincidence that Buffalo is not only among the top 10 cities for lead poisoning,¹ but also one of the top 10 most racially segregated communities in the United States, according to census data.² "If you were to take a map of redlining³ and lay it over a map of lead exposure in Buffalo, the maps would be pretty much the same," says Cara Matteliano of the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo.

From this perspective, another cause of lead poisoning in Buffalo is the decades of disinvestment in communities of color. The housing stock in such communities is older; generally speaking, the older the housing, the higher the concentration of lead. Maintenance is often deferred in such homes and they are less likely to have been made lead-safe. As a result, kids in these communities are more likely—12 times more likely—to test positive for elevated levels of lead in their blood compared with their peers in predominantly White neighborhoods.

Matteliano and her colleagues at the Community Foundation recognized that they could not address the problem of lead exposure without also addressing the systemic racial inequities that helped give rise to it. That's why the Community Foundation put at the center of its work the voices of people in low-income communities of color most directly affected by lead exposure. Focusing on community voices and racial equity has made all the difference between a high-impact program and one that may look nice but does not make lasting change.

With support from the Convergence Partnership, the Community Foundation and its partners have learned how cities can make headway not only on lead, but also on health and racial equity more broadly.

The Tenants and Community Health Workers

Some years ago, a public service advertisement warned parents in Buffalo that there might be a "monster"—lead paint—lurking silently in their home and showed a baby sucking its fingers. The reasoning was that those images would be enough to scare anyone into action.

"A lot of the public health materials have been fear-based," says Jessica Bauer Walker, executive director of the Community Health Worker Network. "The billboards. The letters saying, 'Your child has lead poisoning!' Materials like these are not informed by the trauma that some people have experienced," she says.

In other words, such billboards and letters might be enough to scare people into inaction. These kinds of unintended consequences can happen when messages are developed without the input of the people most likely to need them. Bauer Walker's community health worker group has teamed up with the Community Foundation to work on lead exposure with low-income renters and immigrant families—the populations in Buffalo who are most affected.

"Messages look a lot different when they're shaped with help from the community," says Bauer Walker. "Our larger message is about how to keep your home healthy and happy." A critical aspect of this program are the messengers themselves. She continues, "I cannot overstate how important it is to have frontline organizers, advocates, and educators from the communities they serve" when trying to engage community members. "This is distinct from most government workers, who typically do not know the culture or people of the community," she adds.

Bauer Walker's group trains community health workers on lead exposure. All trainees are "of and from" the community, Bauer Walker says. One training group includes people from a faith-based group, a block club, a parent's group, and elsewhere, for example. They learn about lead in the context of an array of public health issues, like fresh air or community violence.

Once they go into the community—equipped with new skills and new educational materials designed by a diverse team of community members—community health workers "might not even start with lead, but will weave in messages about lead," says Bauer Walker. "A typical health system is set up for very

specific things—lead prevention is here, mental health is over there, and affordable housing isn't even on the map. But in people's lives, they're all related. That's why we need a more holistic approach."

The network also collaborated with a local theatre company to create a seven-minute play about lead exposure. The play, called *Legacy of Lead*, was created by the Ujima Theater. The actors are from the community: a lawyer plays a lawyer, a teacher plays a teacher, a woman with lead-poisoned children has that role in the production. The play was designed to be staged easily in a community center or church, sparking discussion with the audience.

"This has been one of the most powerful aspects of our work, integrating the arts," says Bauer Walker. "We've presented the play to all types of mixed audiences, from community-based groups to funders and government housing officials." As the actors and the community health workers go deeper into the community, they get feedback and revise the script to spark even more productive dialogue and reach across communities and issues.

The Landlords

"Let's say you're approaching a door, and it looks like a door you should push, but you get there, and it turns out it's a pull door—that's bad design!" So says Aaron Krolikowski, a consultant hired by the Community Foundation to work on this effort, by way of explaining his work on "human-centered design." The same principle applies to community programs. He continues, "If it doesn't work for the people who are supposed to be using it, it's bad design—no matter how much thought smart people have put into it—and you'll have wasted time and money."

Krolikowski could be speaking about how lead prevention programs should be designed to target renters. But the Community Foundation has brought him in to work with landlords. "The conventional wisdom is that landlords are wealthy and callous and not doing a thing about this. They're the villains," Krolikowski says.

When he got involved in the project, Krolikowski's first task was to figure out who the landlords were and where they lived. Diving into public data, Krolikowski learned that just over half of the landlords in the most lead-affected zip codes in the city lived in Buffalo, many of them in the very buildings and neighborhoods where they rented out apartments. Another quarter of them lived in Western New York. Just 10 percent were out of state, and 1 percent were overseas. Nearly 80 percent of the owners of at-risk single- and two-family rental homes have just one property, and another 15 percent own only two or three properties. "In other words, these are mostly mom-and-pop landlords," Krolikowski explains. In many cases, owning or managing rental properties provides a limited income; landlords may have other jobs, or in some cases, the meagre rent they collect every year is their only income. Krolikowski adds, "For older adults and others who can't get jobs this is a reality."

It was not just statistical data that Krolikowski sought out. He went on to speak with landlords where they live and work. "I met them for lunch, or over a beer, or at the hardware store or paint store. I attended a full-day EPA workshop for landlords who had been cited for lead." Krolikowski says he needed to understand the "touch points" where landlords were interacting with government officials or others about lead, and precisely where the problems were. Metaphorically speaking, where exactly were the pull doors when landlords expected push doors?

Just as community health workers reach parents where they are, so too do Krolikowski and other Community Foundation partners communicate with landlords where they are. Rather than focusing on better billboards or radio spots, Krolikowski sought out discrete points of contact, like the letter that landlords receive when tenants file their rental forms or the local hardware store where they get advice about lead abatement.

“Our goal is to get fewer kids with lead exposure and poisoning,” he concludes. “Landlords have to be part of the solution.”

The Policymakers

Communicating better with landlords and parents about lead poisoning is vital. But no amount of better messaging will truly end the problem of lead poisoning in children.

“Policy change is how progress will be made,” says Andrea Ó Súilleabháin, executive director of Partnership for the Public Good (PPG). Her organization is a community-based think tank of nearly 300 partner groups in health, housing, environment, justice, and other areas. Ó Súilleabháin says, “We provide partners and local residents with the research they need to turn their ideas into public policies.”

Lead poisoning has emerged as a top-10 issue in Buffalo in recent years, and PPG takes this and other big community concerns to the Buffalo City Council and other elected officials. The Community Foundation enlisted PPG in an effort to speed up progress on this issue. Through interviews and meetings, PPG uncovered some of the concerns surrounding lead abatement—tenants getting evicted, landlords unable to afford repairs—that had come up elsewhere, and then explored policy solutions. “We’re focused on solutions that address lead poisoning as well as housing affordability and stability challenges—repeated evictions and forced moves, health-harming conditions, and rising rents,” says Ó Súilleabháin.

Arcane matters of governance and policy turn out to be significant in how Buffalo makes—or fails to make—progress on reducing lead exposure. Oftentimes progress has to do with not only the elected officials who make public policy but also the public servants who put it into daily practice. County health inspectors often have a hard time getting into people’s homes. First, they inspect the outside of a building, then they knock on the door. Bauer Walker says that it’s important to do inspections in a culturally competent way: inspectors should knock on the doors before they circle the property, otherwise tenants see them prowling around and will not trust them enough to open their doors.

While changing inspectors’ practices is beneficial to communities, it’s even more important to deepen the inspectors’ understanding of community residents. To that end, the Community Foundation sponsored a training on racial equity for frontline municipal workers, including health and housing inspectors. The training showed how certain policies come together to create structural racism, such as in the form of redlining. Further, it asked participants to use a racial equity

lens to analyze current policy. However, it became apparent that some frontline workers did not accept the existence of structural racism.

“It was difficult for us to understand,” says Matteliano from the Community Foundation. “If anyone could see the impact of redlining decades later, it should be people who work in affected neighborhoods every day. But then we realized that it was good to have this exposed. Now we know that we need a bigger toolbox for racial equity. We need to offer training on implicit racial bias for the folks who are not ready to hear about structural racism.”

Ó Súilleabháin joins people from the Community Foundation and other stakeholders on a task force to make Buffalo homes lead-safe. She says that previously, “The task force hadn’t reached community residents at the block level. They focused a lot on planning and research, and less on in-person, interactive education and engagement.” Now, PPG and other groups working on lead have done just that: reached out and into tenant meetings, landlords’ letters, and environmental workshops, and ensured those voices would become connected to policy.

The Foundation

“Lifting up community voices has changed our lives, it has changed the way we work,” says Matteliano of the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo.

The Community Foundation has centered their work in community voices by investing in community health workers, drawing on the wide-ranging relationships of PPG, and sponsoring the production of a short play about lead exposure featuring community actors. The Community Foundation has also heard from landlords, who have upended some of their expectations, and they have received honest—if troubling—input from lead inspectors, which has only deepened their resolve to tackle racial inequity.

“We’ve heard so many heartbreaking stories—tenants who have a lot of lead in their homes, or they have no hot water, no heat, or their ceiling caved in,” says Matteliano. But it’s not enough just to gather those stories, she adds. “Nothing makes a difference like seeing the conditions people live in and hearing directly from them. So we share those stories with people who have the power to make change.”

The Community Foundation shares these stories through community tours with public officials from Housing and Urban Development or the state Attorney General’s office; through the Racial Equity Roundtable, a group of local leaders from government, business, faith communities, philanthropy and beyond; and through advocacy work done by the PPG. “Once you hear from families, you can’t turn away,” says Matteliano.

The Future

“The institutions have infrastructure and resources that we need, and communities have the relationships,” says Bauer Walker of the Community Health Worker Network. “We can collaborate, and we must collaborate to solve this problem.” Matteliano of the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo agrees, saying, “This is an all-hands-on-deck situation. We need the public sector to do more inspections and enforcement. We need families to watch for lead and report it. We need a place for them to go if they get evicted or temporarily displaced while lead remediation work is going on. We need landlords to get involved. We need philanthropy and banks to provide a pipeline of grants and loans.”

Getting to this point was made possible in no small part by the Convergence Partnership. “Convergence gave us the courage and funding to think big and reach deeply into community-supporting grassroots work and community-driven research that we could not have supported ourselves,” says Matteliano.

Convergence funding also backed the launch of a website, GetAheadofLead.org, that provides resources for tenants and landlords in Western New York. The website is not the end, but rather part of an ongoing campaign to engage tenants, community health workers, and small landlords to make the city lead-safe. Campaign organizers will seek input from grassroots partners over time on everything from messages to logos to outreach methods.

“We are asking the right questions now,” Matteliano says. “We’ve lifted up community voices. We’ve brought together people who’ve never been talking. And it’s clear now that this is not just about lead. The bigger problem is healthy affordable rental housing and racial equity. So we’ve taken on a whole other level of work. It’s intimidating, because it’s a huge issue, but it has to be done.”

Acknowledgments

Convergence Partnership would like to thank [Working Narratives](#) for developing this profile, especially Paul VanDecarr, Nick Szuberla, and Mik Moore ([Moore + Associates](#)).

The Partnership would also like to extend deep appreciation to the following partners for contributing their valuable time, experiences, and insights to these stories:

- Aaron Krolkowski, Consultant
- Andrea Ó Súilleabháin, [Partnership for the Public Good](#)
- Cara Matteliano, [Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo](#)
- Jessica Bauer Walker, [Community Health Worker Network of Buffalo](#)

Cover photo: [“File:Ken-Bailey Buffalo - 20191216.jpg”](#) by [Andre Carrotflower](#) is licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](#)

Notes

- 1 M. B. Pell and Joshua Schneyer, “The Thousands of U.S. Locales Where Lead Poisoning Is Worse than in Flint,” Reuters, December 19, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-lead-testing/#interactive-lead>
- 2 Anne Blatto, *A City Divided: A Brief History of Segregation in Buffalo, Partnership for the Public Good and Open Buffalo*, April 2018, https://ppgbuffalo.org/files/documents/data-demographics-history/a_city_divided_a_brief_history_of_segregation_in_the_city_of_buffalo.pdf
- 3 Redlining describes discriminatory practices by which specific residents and communities—most often residents and communities of color—are systematically and intentionally denied access to loans (e.g., mortgages) and other services.



Lifting Up What Works®

Headquarters

1438 Webster Street
Suite 303
Oakland, CA 94612
t 510 663-2333
f 510 663-9684

Communications

75 Broad Street
Suite 701
New York, NY 10004
t 212 629-9570

Washington, DC

1301 K Street, NW
Suite 300 W-414
Washington, DC 20005

policylink.org

Facebook: /PolicyLink
Twitter: @policylink
Instagram: @policylink