



## **MEDIA RELEASE**

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### **LEAD POISONING REMAINS PERSISTENT PROBLEM IN NEW YORK CITY Lack of Landlord Maintenance, Legal Gaps Cited by Sickened Children's Parents**

**NEW YORK** – As the organizing member of the New York City Lead Outreach Campaign – a coalition of community groups combating lead poisoning in Manhattan, Brooklyn and the Bronx – staff members from WE ACT for Environmental Justice recently spoke extensively with three families whose children were found by blood tests to suffer lead poisoning.

Despite the 88% drop in lead poisoning in the city from 1995 to 2006, the disease is so dangerous that each and every case is potentially disabling. All the more reason why the Enill family of Crown Heights and the Ordonez and Vasquez families of the South Bronx felt determined to speak out about what factors they thought contributed to their children's illnesses.

Among the problems identified were:

- \* A general lack of maintenance in apartments. The Ordonezes and Vasquezes said they had mold problems and heat shut-offs during the winter. The Enills said their unit was generally in good shape, but that there were problems with doorframes and windowsills, which are likely to have lead paint.
- \* Landlord refusal to comply with Local Law 1, the city law designed to keep children safe from lead paint. The Ordonezes and Vasquezes said they never received the annual notice from their landlords, required when children live in a multifamily building, that their apartments may (and in fact did) have lead paint due to the age of the building.
- \* The greater difficulty in protecting children against lead paint in two-family houses. The Enills never received such notice, either – but under Local Law 1, their landlord didn't have to give annual notices.
- \* Landlord non-compliance with U.S. Environmental Protection Agency rules. The Ordonezes and Vasquezes described repairs at their apartments, just before their children fell ill, that were on their face violations of EPA rules on fixing lead paint. The Enills also saw practices by a city subcontractor,

hired by their landlord to fix the apartment after the Enills' child fell sick and lead paint was discovered in their unit, that appeared to scatter paint dust and chips in ways against EPA rules. (For the record, a representative of the city Department of Housing Preservation and Development said all city subcontractors are in compliance with EPA rules for both training and work practices.)

\* Inability to trust that a home is "fixed." The Enills and Vasquezes ended up moving from their lead paint-ridden units, even after city inspectors approved them as safe following repairs, and the Ordonezes are looking to move as well.

One bit of good news is the availability of help for families with children with lead poisoning. All three families took advantage of the resources at Lead Clinic at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx for treatment for their children; all report their children's blood lead levels are declining. The Vasquezes and Ordonezes were helped by the Safe House for Lead Poisoning Prevention at the Children's Hospital at Montefiore for temporary shelter, as the Enills were by the Lead Safe House program operated by Pratt Area Community Council (PACC) in Bedford Stuyvesant.

Still, the prognosis for their children is guarded. The Vasquez family's 3-year-old daughter shows delays from normal developmental milestones, possibly caused by lead poisoning. The Ordonez family's 18-month-old son and the Enill family's 17-month-old son show no symptoms of permanent illness. Unfortunately, illness from lead poisoning sometimes does not appear immediately.

The message from two mothers was the same – awareness saves children's health.

"My mind was not on lead," said Sofia Ordonez. "But if you live in an older neighborhood like this, it's very important to test the kids."

"Sometimes," added Radka Enill, "I wish I'd been a little more careful."

**NOTE TO MEDIA:** Contact information for the Enill, Ordonez and Vasquez families for potential interviews is available from Larry Parker of WE ACT. Alternatively, pre-written and sourced freelance stories -- a short, general brief oriented toward newsletters; a longer piece oriented toward Brooklyn audiences; and a longer piece oriented toward Bronx audiences -- are also available from Parker.

**WE ACT for Environmental Justice (West Harlem Environmental Action, Inc.) is a non-profit, community-based, environmental justice organization dedicated to building community power to fight environmental racism and improve environmental health, protection and policy in communities of color. WE ACT accomplishes this mission through community organizing, education and training, advocacy and research, and public policy development.**

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