Oral Testimony
Before New York City Council
Committee on Health, jointly with the Committee on Housing and Buildings, the Committee on Public Housing, and the Committee on Education

Oversight - LeadFreeNYC and the enforcement of the City’s lead laws.

Sonal Jessel
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WE ACT for Environmental Justice

Thank you for holding the hearing today and for the opportunity to testify regarding New York City’s lead laws.

I am Sonal Jessel, and I’m a Policy and Advocacy Coordinator at WE ACT for Environmental Justice. Over the past 30 years, WE ACT has been combating environmental racism in Northern Manhattan. WE ACT was part of the advocacy team lead by Matt Chachere in drafting and fighting for the passage of Local Law 1 in 2004. I am here as a member of the New York City Coalition to End Lead Poisoning, NYCELP, a collection of experts and advocates who have been involved in action to end lead poisoning. WE ACT is an original member of the coalition. I myself have received my Master in Public Health from Columbia University.

As many others will testify today, New York City, the Department of Housing Preservation and Development and the Department of Health have failed to enforce all aspects of Local Law 1, which sought to end lead-based paint exposure by 2010 for all New Yorkers. The passage of the law was exciting because it shifted the burden of lead mitigation from the tenants to the landlords; tenants were no longer responsible for dealing with lead problems in their homes. The law made it possible to have systematic benefits for all tenants across the city.

Yesterday, NYCELP published our report on lead violations, and found that only about $10,000 of fines have been collected for violations since the law was enacted 15 years ago. In contrast, we found that collections from street vendor health code violations amounted to over $5,000,000 in the past 15 years. Why does the city impose and collect more penalties for street vending, but not for lead poisoning? There is no excuse for failing enforce the law when landlords endanger tenants’ health.

As a public health worker, I am deeply concerned about the City’s consistent failure to end lead poisoning. Lead poisoning causes serious harm to children’s health, damaging the brain and nervous system, leading to developmental delays, behavioral problems, hearing and speech problems, and more (CDC). These harms are not treatable with simple medication, they have impacts that last through the
lifespan. “Imaging studies of adults who had elevated blood levels in childhood have demonstrated” negative impacts on the brain and nervous system, and children exposed to lead are at greater risk of becoming hypertensive adults. Lead can also cause pregnancy complications (American Academy of Pediatrics). Lead poisoning is 100% preventable and there is no excuse for this to still be an issue.

Therefore, I join other advocates, experts, and community members to urge the City to enforce all parts of Local Law 1 by increasing penalties for landlords, adding additional measures for fine collections, coordinating more between agencies, and improving enforcement for safe work practices.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,
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