

ALLIANCE ALERT

A Publication by the Alliance for Healthy Homes

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Walter Reed Army Medical Center Exposed for Providing Substandard Housing to Wounded Veterans

In a scandal that rocked the nation in mid-February, the *Washington Post* and other media outlets revealed that the Pentagon had been providing substandard and unhealthy housing, as well as poor medical care, to injured Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC. A subsequent avalanche of complaints from veterans and their families suggest that similar problems exist at many other military and Veterans Administration medical facilities across the country.

The *Post* exposé described injured soldiers housed in rooms with water damage, significant mold growth, rodent infestations, and holes in floors and ceilings. The problems were especially severe in Walter Reed's Building 18. Such conditions were neither isolated nor new; the problems had persisted for years, even after a congressman's wife and others complained to officials in charge.

Top Walter Reed officials initially responded to the news reports by calling them exaggerated and attacking "media assaults on Walter Reed and our senior leaders." These same officials then shifted to organizing press tours of Building 18 to show how quickly the Army was moving to make repairs. However, news stories revealed that the repairs included painting over mold and baiting units with rat poison—hardly a well-considered strategy to address unhealthy conditions.

During the following weeks, several top Army officials, including the Secretary of the Army and the Surgeon General of the Army (who also served as commander of Walter Reed from 2002 to June 2004 and who was temporarily reappointed to head the center after the scandal broke), resigned or were removed, and several official panels and task forces have been created to investigate and address these problems, plus similar conditions alleged to exist at other military and Veterans Administration medical facilities. It remains unclear whether a more health-oriented approach has yet been undertaken to address the substandard conditions, even in Walter Reed's Building 18.

Excessive moisture and mold growth in housing can cause allergy and asthma symptoms, and in rare cases, certain species of mold can cause fungal infections in those with compromised immune systems due to serious injury or illness. Rodent infestations can pose a number of problems, including contagious disease transmission and allergy and asthma symptoms. Mouse allergen is especially difficult to eliminate once mice have been present in a housing unit. Pest control strategies known as integrated pest management are widely accepted as safer and healthier alternatives to the use of rodenticides and other poisons.

The *Washington Post*'s series of reports is available at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/linkset/2007/02/21/LI2007022100671.html. For more information on maintaining a healthy home environment, visit www.afhh.org/hhe/hhe_main.htm. Details on the health hazards posed by—and solutions to—mold and rodents, are available from www.afhh.org/hhe/hhe_mold.htm,

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www.afhh.org/dah/dah_mold.htm, www.afhh.org/hhe/hhe_rodents.htm, and www.afhh.org/dah/dah_rodents.htm.

FY 2008 Budget Proposal Falls Short on Healthy Homes Funding

Continuing the pattern of the past six years, the Bush Administration's FY 2008 budget request shortchanges several programs related to healthy homes.

In one significant cut, the president requests only \$116 million for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Office of Healthy Homes and Lead Hazard Control grant programs (compared with \$152 million approved by Congress last year), and the president again proposes to eliminate a \$50 million program to help cities with the worst lead poisoning problems. Bush's budget also proposes to slash the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program by more than \$1 billion.

The FY08 budget request provides only level funding to environmental health and lead poisoning prevention programs at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and it repeats the president's attempts to cut environmental justice funding at EPA. In one of its most ill advised moves, the request also guts the popular Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) that helps the elderly and many disabled Americans keep their homes at healthy temperatures.

For more information on the FY08 Budget Request, visit www.afhh.org/aa/aa_hh_policy_federal_funding.htm.

Red Cross-Clorox Pesticide Marketing Deal Could Endanger Consumers

In March, Beyond Pesticides reported that the American Red Cross has signed a deal with Clorox, allowing the Red Cross symbol to be affixed to pesticide products that the company produces in exchange for a contribution to the charity of up to one million dollars.

Though the labeling, which may imply product safety and nontoxicity to many consumers, appears to violate federal pesticide labeling laws, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has decided to allow the deal to move forward.

While pesticide products available to consumers are often mistakenly viewed as "safe," they do contain toxic materials. Some of the products can cause irritation of the eyes, skin, respiratory, and gastrointestinal tract. Exposure to high levels can result in severe corrosive damage to the eyes, skin, respiratory, and gastrointestinal tissues. Heart conditions, asthma, chronic bronchitis, and obstructive lung disease can be exacerbated by exposure to high concentrations of many pesticide products, including those used in the home. Some pesticides also contain suspected neurotoxins and carcinogens.

"While EPA should ensure severe caution when using pesticides, a label displaying the Red Cross symbol sends a misleading message that will undoubtedly result in greater product misuse because of a failure to heed important product warnings," said Jay Feldman, executive director of Beyond Pesticides.

Twelve environmental health organizations petitioned EPA in February, citing a blatant violation of its own guidelines which prohibit false and misleading labels, including: "Symbols implying safety or nontoxicity, such as a Red Cross or a medical seal of approval (caduceus)."

For more information on the pesticide labeling deal, visit www.beyondpesticides.org/redcross/. For more on how you can reduce or eliminate pesticides in the home through integrated pest management, see www.afhh.org/dah/dah_pesticides.htm.

Solis and Durbin Introduce Bills to Implement Federal Environmental Justice Order

Rep. Hilda Solis (D-CA) and Sen. Richard Durbin (D-IL) in February introduced the Environmental Justice Act of 2007 to implement a Clinton-era executive order to remedy environmental health problems in minority and low-income communities throughout the United States. In the House, the bill is H.R. 1103; in the Senate, the legislation is S. 642.

The Clinton order requires that the EPA make environmental justice part of its core mission. In March 2004, the EPA Inspector General found that the agency had failed to fully implement the order, and neither Congress nor the president have done much since then. In fact, President Bush has proposed cutting EPA's environmental justice budget during the past several budget cycles.

"For far too long, federal agencies have disregarded the health of minority and low-income communities, choosing instead to interpret the Executive Order so that it fits the policies they want to promote," said Solis.

Durbin highlighted the importance of incorporating environmental justice at EPA and other federal agencies. "Minority neighborhoods, the elderly, and low-income neighborhoods bear disproportionate environmental risks and hazards, and the investments and benefits to these problems are not equally distributed," he said.

The full text of both bills is available at <http://thomas.loc.gov>. In the "Search Bill Text" area, select the "Bill Number" option and then enter either HR1103 or S642.

For more information on the importance of environmental justice, visit www.afhh.org/res/res_by_topic_EJ.htm.

Rhode Island Case against Paint Companies Moves Forward

In late February, Judge Michael Silverstein of Rhode Island refused to throw out last year's jury verdict or order a new trial in the state's case against several former lead pigment manufacturers. The state was victorious in February 2006 when a jury found that three paint companies had created a public nuisance by selling lead-based paint in Rhode Island. The case marked the first time that a state or local government succeeded in proving a public nuisance case against the industry.

In his decision, Silverstein indicated that the case will now move forward, and he will appoint a special master to oversee the remedy. The jury ordered that Sherwin-Williams, Millenium Inorganic, and NL Industries (formerly National Lead) work to eliminate lead-based paint in housing in Rhode Island. The cleanup could cost the companies more than \$3 billion.

The companies are expected to appeal the ruling, along with other aspects of the case, to the Rhode Island Supreme Court.

For more information on this and other cases against former lead pigment manufacturers, visit www.afhh.org/aa/aa_legal_remedies_lawsuits_cases.htm.

Vermont Attorney General to Tackle Lead Poisoning “Aggressively”

Vermont Attorney General William Sorrell announced in early February that he and others in the state will take an “aggressive stance” against lead poisoning in the state. Sorrell’s statement accompanied the release of a new report on lead poisoning in Vermont.

The report, "Get the Lead Out of Vermont," found that for too long, the state has been focusing on cleaning and other measures that, by themselves, are ineffective at preventing childhood lead poisoning. The state has also been trying to combat lead poisoning after children have already been poisoned. The report concluded that Vermont must take a more proactive approach, addressing lead hazards in housing before anyone actually gets sick.

Sorrell said that while existing state law requires rental property owners to follow essential maintenance practices and report to the state health department, compliance is voluntary and ineffective; every year, more than 300 Vermont children are poisoned by lead. Sorrell instead wants to be able to issue automatic fines to landlords who don’t comply with the law, and the report recommends that some landlords be required to pay for dust sampling in their properties.

Also in February, Vermont announced that it was going to reduce its blood lead action level from the current 10 micrograms per deciliter ($\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$), which is recommended by the CDC, to 5 $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$.

To read the full report, visit www.atg.state.vt.us/upload/1170342083_Lead_Housing.pdf. The Attorney General’s office also released a report on lead in consumer products. That report is available at www.atg.state.vt.us/upload/1170959947_Lead_Consumer_Products.pdf. Even more information the reports and the Vermont Attorney General’s efforts against lead poisoning can be found at www.atg.state.vt.us/display.php?smod=218.

New York City Pledges to Keep Homeless Safe from Lead

Following revelations in January that New York City had placed hundreds of homeless families into apartments riddled with lead hazards, the city’s Department of Homeless Services said it will change the way it inspects apartments in the Housing Stability Plus (HSP) program for lead and pledged to keep homeless families safe from the potent neurotoxin.

Homeless Services Commissioner Robert Hess said that “higher inspection standards” will be used in all buildings new to the program. The city did, however, refrain from saying that it would reinspect all buildings previously participating in the program, including over 700 that were found to contain lead-based paint. Instead, the city will address those buildings where complaints have been filed against landlords for not repairing lead hazards, and it will also reinspect all buildings where repair orders were issued.

The city also noted that all HSP inspectors will be trained in lead hazard visual assessment by the city’s Department of Housing Preservation and Development.

Bush Nominates Industry Insider to Head CPSC

On March 1, President Bush nominated Michael Baroody to be chairman of the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), the agency charged with protecting the public against injury and death from a wide range of consumer products.

Baroody currently serves as the executive vice president of the National Association of Manufacturers, an industry trade group that often works against regulation of consumer products.

One of the three CPSC commissioner positions has been vacant since July 2006. The commission's ability to act has been suspended since January because the law only allows it to act with a vacancy for six months. CPSC has also been plagued by a "brain drain" due to inadequate funding levels. Since FY 2006, the agency reported that it lost the equivalent of 31 full-time staff, and another 20 full-time equivalent positions could be lost by the end of FY 2007. The agency projects a loss of 19 more full-time equivalent positions in FY 2008 if Congress approves the President's current budget request. This would leave approximately 450 employees to monitor more than 15,000 products.

CPSC has been criticized recently over its handling of a lead-in-lunchboxes issue. Though it assured consumers that lead levels in vinyl lunchboxes were well within federal limits, government documents acquired by the Center for Environmental Health (CEH) through the Freedom of Information Act show that CPSC misled the public on the issue.

According to the documents, CPSC's own laboratory testing showed that vinyl lunchboxes had levels of lead as much as 16 times higher than levels allowed for lead in paint. The documents also reveal that at the time the agency was about to announce that vinyl lunchboxes are safe, CPSC had just changed its testing procedure in an apparent effort to minimize findings of lead in lunchboxes.

Said Michael Green, Executive Director of CEH, "CPSC told parents that these lunchboxes were safe, but their own tests showed that lead in these lunchboxes could pose a threat to children." He continued, "It is shocking to see an agency entrusted with our safety playing Russian roulette with our children's health."

For more information on the Baroody nomination, visit www.ombwatch.org/article/articleview/3735/1/479. For more details on the lead-in-lunchboxes controversy, see www.cehca.org/CPSCFOIAinformation.htm. More on the dangers of lead is available at www.afhh.org/hhe/hhe_lead.htm.

Two New Studies Prompt Additional Comment Period on Remodeling and Renovation Rule

The EPA has published two new studies in its Renovation, Repair, and Painting Program rulemaking docket [EPA-HQ-OPPT-2005-0049]. The studies reinforce the need for EPA to make its final rule far more health-protective than the agency's current proposal.

Since the proposed regulation was issued in January 2006, final action has been delayed because EPA decided to await the results of these studies assessing hazards associated with renovation activities. One was conducted by EPA, the other by the National Association of Home Builders. EPA is now reopening public to comment on the proposed work practice standards in light of these studies.

This new comment period provides advocates, researchers, agencies—all stakeholders in lead poisoning prevention—with another opportunity to articulate (or reiterate) the need for (1) a ban on all unsafe practices; (2) post-work dust testing for clearance; (3) proper worker training; and (4) enforcement in any RRP rule, since the EPA study noted here clearly shows that the proposed rule's methods of lead-safe practices are clearly insufficient to prevent the creation and dispersal of hazards after renovation, remodeling, and painting work.

Comments must be submitted to the docket for the proposed rule by April 16, 2007.

For more information about the studies, see www.epa.gov/lead/pubs/renovation.htm#info.

EPA Presents Opportunity to Comment on Pesticide Restrictions

In mid-January, the EPA proposed to reduce or restrict the unsafe use of nine rodenticides (rat and mouse poisons) for health reasons. EPA has opened its proposal to public comments.

Reportedly, the pesticide industry has been flooding the agency with comments in opposition to the proposal, falsely claiming that the restrictions would sharply increase costs of rodent control for low-income people and cause infestations to increase unchecked. Industry comments generally ignore the health benefits from EPA's proposal and disregard the fact that there are safer alternatives such as integrated pest management strategies. Traps, barriers, improved sanitation, clutter control—and even the tamper-resistant baits that EPA would require—offer alternatives for safer, effective pest control and prevention strategies. The Alliance for Healthy Homes urges public health, environmental, and healthy housing advocates to offer comments in support of EPA's proposal to reduce, restrict, or eliminate the use of these poisons.

The public comment period is open until May 18, 2007. For more details and information on how and where to submit formal comments, see www.epa.gov/fedrgstr/EPA-PEST/2007/March/Day-14/p4648.htm. For more information on integrated pest management, visit www.afhh.org/dah/dah_pesticides.htm and www.afhh.org/dah/dah_rodents.htm.

National Children's Study Funded Through End of FY07

A \$69 million appropriation in the FY 2007 joint funding resolution passed by Congress and signed by the president in February will allow the National Children's Study to continue.

The National Children's Study is designed to follow 100,000 children from before birth until they are 21 years old to determine how biological, chemical, physical, genetic, and social factors affect their health and development. The Study is being conducted jointly by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, CDC, and EPA.

The groundbreaking study's future had been in jeopardy when President Bush's FY 2007 budget request asked Congress to zero out the study's funding.

For more information on the National Children's Study, visit www.nationalchildrensstudy.gov/.

California's Low-income and Minority Residents Suffer Most from Asthma

Low-income Californians, as well as those from racial and ethnic minority groups, are hardest hit by breathing problems associated with asthma, according to two new policy briefs. The briefs, “Low-Income Californians Bear Unequal Burden of Asthma” and “California’s Racial and Ethnic Minorities More Adversely Affected by Asthma,” were produced by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. A third policy brief from the Center shows that smoking and pets in the home are linked with asthma symptoms and other breathing difficulties.

The first policy brief on how asthma affects low-income residents of California showed that those least able to afford the skyrocketing costs of health care are disproportionately affected by frequent asthma symptoms and are more likely to visit emergency rooms for treatment of moderate to severe asthma attacks. The brief rated the health outcomes of low-income asthmatics as “poor.”

Besides a lack of access to care, difficulty in proper asthma management also contributes to poor health outcomes. One of the key aspects of managing asthma is avoiding things that trigger symptoms. Because quality affordable housing is in short supply, and because many rental property owners do not practice proper maintenance, avoidance of triggers such as dust mites, mold, and cockroaches can be difficult, if not impossible, for many low-income residents.

The second policy brief examined racial and ethnic disparities in asthma. The brief found that minorities bear a far more significant burden of asthma than their white counterparts, meaning that minorities, especially children, suffered more asthma symptoms, were more likely to visit emergency rooms due to severe asthma symptoms, and missed more days of school and work because of their asthma. These disparities were attributed to a number of factors, including lack of adequate health care, difficulty in managing asthma, and disparities in exposure to indoor environmental health hazards including cigarette smoke, mold, and cockroaches.

The policy briefs are available at www.calendow.org/reference/publications/disparities_in_health.stm#022807-1. For more information on how a healthy home environment can help reduce asthma symptoms, visit www.afhh.org/chil_ar/chil_ar_asthma.htm and www.afhh.org/hhe/hhe_main.htm.

Alliance Releases New Post-Hurricane Healthy Rebuilding Manual

The Alliance for Healthy Homes in March released a manual entitled *Rebuilding Flood-Damaged Homes: A Manual for the Safe, Healthy, Green, and Low-cost Restoration for the Gulf Coast*. The manual was developed through numerous workshops sponsored by the Alliance for organizations working to restore homes in the Gulf region following the 2005 hurricane season as a practical guide for practitioners. It lays out, through easy-to-read instructions and clear illustrations, how to clear out, decontaminate, and restore flood-damaged homes in a safe, healthy and affordable manner. The manual emphasizes how to safely clean and decontaminate flood-damaged homes and restore homes so they are better able to withstand high winds and water intrusion. Healthy homes expert Dennis Livingston is the illustrator and primary author of the manual.

The manual is available online at www.afhh.org/res/res_publications_hurricane_recovery_flood_damage_dl.htm.

New Lead-Safe Work Practices Video Now Available

A new video on lead-safe work practices, entitled "Don't Spread Lead: A Do-It-Yourselfer's Guide to Preventing Lead Poisoning by Working Lead-Safe," is now available in English and Spanish, in DVD format. The video shows do-it-yourselfers how to safely handle small repairs or renovations in homes that contain lead paint. The English version of the program features an introduction by Norm Abram, master carpenter of PBS's "This Old House" and host of PBS's "New Yankee Workshop."

The program was developed by the Connecticut Department of Public Health in partnership with the University of Connecticut's Healthy Environments for Children Initiative, with support from the EPA. It is part of the Keep It Clean Campaign of the New England Lead Coordinating Committee (NELCC).

For a free copy of the video, email your request to ana.chambers@po.state.ct.us. NELCC has also published a related booklet for do-it-yourselfers, available for download at [www.nelcc.uconn.edu/documents/Don t Spread Lead 12 5 06.pdf](http://www.nelcc.uconn.edu/documents/Don_t_Spread_Lead_12_5_06.pdf).

HUD Issues FY 2007 NOFA for Lead Poisoning Prevention and Healthy Homes Grants

HUD published its FY 2007 Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) for lead poisoning prevention and healthy homes grant programs in early March. Grants are available in 7 categories:

- Lead-Based Paint Hazard Control (\$76.4 million available for 26-40 grants of \$1-3 million each, May 18 deadline)
- Healthy Homes Technical Studies (\$2 million available, 2-6 grants of \$200,000 to \$1 million, May 18 deadline)
- Lead Technical Studies (\$3.6 million available, 4-10 grants of \$200,000 to \$1 million, May 18 deadline)
- Healthy Homes Demonstration (approximately \$5 million available, 5-7 cooperative agreements of up to \$1 million each, May 18 deadline)
- Lead Outreach Program (approximately \$2 million available, 5-8 cooperative agreements of \$200,000 to \$400,000 each, May 18 deadline)
- Operation Lead Elimination Action Program (LEAP) (\$17.3 million available for 9-12 grants of up to \$2 million each, May 18 deadline)
- Lead-Based Paint Hazard Reduction Demonstration (\$54.7 million available for 14-22 grants of \$1-4 million each, May 30 deadline)

More details are available at www.hud.gov/offices/adm/grants/nofa07/grplead.cfm.

Funding Opportunity

EPA's Office of Children's Health Protection has announced the availability of \$300,000 to fund three grants to build capacity to address environmental health issues during pregnancy. State and local governments, public and private universities and colleges, and nonprofit organizations are eligible to apply. The announcement is available at www.epa.gov/children (click on "grants and funding") or at Grants.gov at www.grants.gov/search/search.do?oppId=12774&mode=VIEW. The deadline for submission is April 26, 2007.

Upcoming Conferences

The annual Indoor Environmental Health and Technologies Conference and the National Conference of Lead and Healthy Homes Grantees will take place April 24-27, 2007, in Orlando, FL. Partial registration scholarships are available for attendees from nonprofit organizations, local government agencies, and small businesses. For information on scholarships, poster opportunities, and displaying educational materials, please call or e-mail Steve Weil, Conference Director, at 301-924-0804, list@leadmoldconferences.com. Program, hotel, and registration details are at www.leadmoldconferences.com.

The International Conference on Developmental Toxicity and Fetal Programming will take place May 20-24, 2007, in Tórshavn, Faroe Islands (located in the North Atlantic). This international conference emphasizes a) the developmental perspective, i.e., the risks during different developmental stages, from preconception to adolescence, from toxic substances; b) the environmental perspective, i.e., the impacts of different environmental hazards; and c) the disease perspective, i.e., long-term health implications. For further information, please visit www.pptox.dk.

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