

South Minneapolis mom chipping away at lead poisoning hazard

After finding out her kids had lead poisoning, one mother is making sure others are spared.

By **Beena Raghavendran** Star Tribune

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Richard Sennott – Star Tribune

Ticiea Fletcher, whose two children, 7-year-old Logan, left, and Dustin, 6, were found with high levels of lead in their blood in 2009, is now actively promoting lead awareness around the Twin Cities. She will be holding an event with free blood testing for children under 6 at McRae Park on June 29.

It was the porch windows' fault.

Ticiea Fletcher, 43, would pop them open for a breeze as her children played in her south Minneapolis apartment, cleaning her floors regularly to clear settled dust.

But everything changed after a checkup in 2009 revealed that her 10-month-old son, Dustin Shields, had high levels of lead in his blood — 21 micrograms per deciliter. Her daughter, 1-year-old Logan Shields, had 18 micrograms.

Dustin, now 6, has developmental disabilities blamed on chipping lead paint around windows in the apartment, and Fletcher is on a mission to make sure that other children are spared that diagnosis.

“All the windows were full of lead poisoning and I wasn’t aware of it,” she said.

Now, Fletcher is spreading lead awareness through events and word of mouth. To promote her free blood-testing station for children under 6, Fletcher — who has a partnership with healthy-home advocate Sustainable Resources Center — last week was passing out fliers for an event to be held from 2 to 6 p.m. Sunday at McRae Park.



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At her events, Ticiea Fletcher distributes fliers to inform people about the dangers of lead poisoning in the home. In 2009, both of her children were found with high levels of lead in their blood.

And through her organization Missions to the Streets, which works with landlords and tenants to give homes to the homeless, Fletcher ensures her clients can detect lead risks in potential apartments.

At that time Dustin’s blood was tested, a level of 10 micrograms per deciliter was considered “elevated” and meant a lead poisoning diagnosis. In April, the Minnesota Commissioner of Health lowered the state’s threshold from 10 micrograms to 5. This means that lead exposure can be limited by removing its traces in homes earlier, said Joe Houseman, director of production for the Sustainable Resources Center, which carries out lead-abatement work.

Minnesota has seen a decrease in lead-poisoning cases over the years, but cases still surface, said Stephanie Yendell, principal epidemiologist for the Lead and Healthy Homes program at the Minnesota Department of Health. Houseman said a lower level will lead to more people diagnosed with lead poisoning.

In 2012, Minnesota saw 527 cases of elevated blood levels compared to 1,750 in 2002 — a decline that comes back to increased prevention efforts, according to the latest numbers from the state Department of Health. About 91,000 children under 6 were tested in 2011 and 2012, an increase from the early 2000s, the report said.

Facts about the poison

Lead paint, though banned in houses built after 1978, hides in older houses. It may be painted over, but when lead paint is chipped or aggravated — by cracking a window, for example — the lead settles and disguises itself as dust. If toddlers are playing nearby and stick dusty fingers in their mouths, contamination can happen. Symptoms aren’t always telling; a blood test is the only confirmation of lead poisoning.

The Department of Health sees cases from old houses, particularly in the Twin Cities and southern Minnesota, Yendell said. And because of lead formerly in gasoline, areas of higher traffic — such as the Twin Cities — can have lead lingering in soil.

The effects of lead on children can be more serious because their brains are still developing, she said, adding that the consequences of poisoning can be seizures or death.

“In the last couple years, we come to realize there’s no safe level of exposure to lead,” she said.

Fletcher doesn’t take any chances.

“Now, when I go in and look at an apartment, the first thing I do is see if there’s any signs of peeling paint on the porch,” Fletcher said. “I look around like I’m a city inspector now, but I have to, because of my son and daughter.”

Dreaming big

Since living in her contaminated apartment five years ago, Fletcher has made changes. In 2009, she sued the landlord and won three months of rent.

She moved, ensuring her new home was lead-free. She took a state-run class, Partners in Policymaking, to better advocate for her son’s disabilities. And she started her organization working with landlords and tenants.

Fletcher said it’s critical that landlords evaluate property for lead risks before renting. Not doing so is “laziness,” she said.

Dustin will be disabled for life — his brain is damaged and his speech is impaired — but he’s getting better, Fletcher said, adding that she hopes her work for the issue will make an impact.

“I have no trouble sleeping at night,” Fletcher said. “If you have a problem sleeping at night, don’t take a sleep aid or anything. Help somebody.”