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By Luis Perez

Staff writer

More lead poisoning targeted

Effort to fix problems in child-care homes will be first of its kind in country.

Two Syracuse nonprofit groups armed with a significant chunk of federal dollars are opening a new front in the battle against childhood lead poisoning.

The money will go to start a pilot program, the first in the country, to make sure children are safe from lead in regulated family child-care homes

Home Headquarters and the Child Care Council of Onondaga County will split \$930,789 with two Rochester groups and two national organizations for the program. The organizations will match some of the federal grant with their own money, putting the cost for entire program at more than \$1 million.

Currently, there are no lead-abatement programs targeting home child-care providers. The number of such providers has gone up because of government requirements that welfare recipients get jobs, program officials said.

In Onondaga County, there are about 450 registered and licensed child-care homes. Out of those, 188 are in Syracuse, according to the child care council.

Program officials plan to check the homes for lead hazards and fix them before any children are found with elevated blood lead levels. That's a significant departure from government programs that usually order home repairs only after a child is found to have high lead levels.

"We're looking at a ripe opportunity to help budge the system out the rut of reacting to poisoned kids," said Don Ryan, executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based Alliance to End Childhood Lead Poisoning.

The money for Syracuse and Rochester is part of \$6.5 million in U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development grants going to seven programs across the country to help prevent childhood lead poisoning. Federal officials hope to match the grants with \$17 million in private money. If the program is successful, officials want to replicate it across the country.

The National Center for Healthy Housing, based in Columbia, Md., will oversee the programs here and in Rochester. That organization and the Enterprise Foundation, based in the same city, will provide \$192,000 in matching money for the program. In addition, Home Headquarters will match whatever money it gets to fix up the child-care homes dollar for dollar, said Kerry Quaglia, executive director.

"This way, we're going out and not waiting for children to have high lead levels," said Peggy Liuzzi, the child care council's executive director.

Lead is a dangerous toxin, especially to children younger than 6 since they most easily absorb the poison into their bodies, which are still developing. The damage is often irreversible.

Children are most commonly poisoned by deteriorating lead paint, which is found in older homes in poor neighborhoods. Soil in those neighborhoods is often laced with lead as well.

Last year, Onondaga County health officials found 697 children with high levels of lead in their blood. The vast majority of lead-poisoned children were found in the city. Program officials don't know how many of those children were poisoned in child-care settings.

The only way to prevent lead poisoning is to remove the source.

Program officials expect to spend about \$15,000 repairing lead hazards in 25 homes between the two cities over the next two years.

The child care council will identify and recruit the child-care homes, often run by parents of small children. Home Headquarters will inspect the homes and oversee the repairs. And the national groups will provide training, education and outreach.

The program "is not the be-all and end-all," Quaglia said. "But it's significant for children cared for in those properties."