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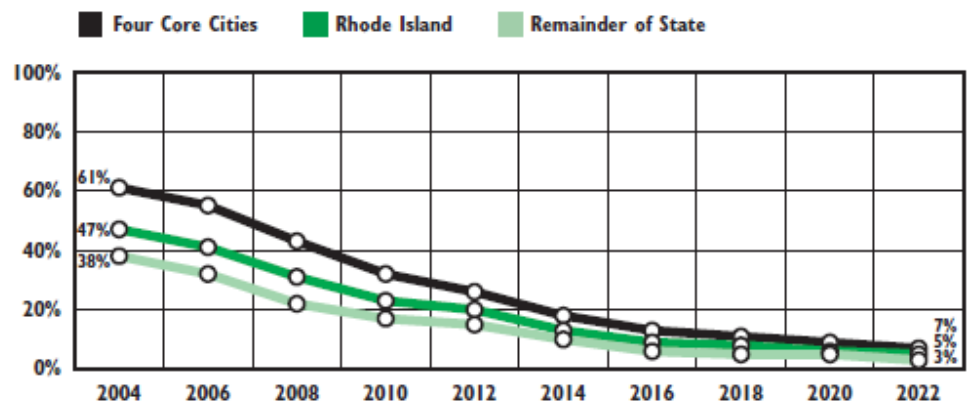
Testimony Re: H-5138 Lead Poisoning Prevention Act
House Finance Committee
April 25, 2023
Kaitlyn Rabb, Policy Analyst

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its support for House Bill 5138. This bill would establish a plan and guidelines to replace all lead service lines statewide, leading to cleaner and safer drinking water for all Rhode Islanders.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to thank Representative Morales for sponsoring this bill and thank the co-sponsors, Representatives Kislak, Carson, Cortvriend, Casimiro, Vella-Wilkinson, Diaz, Giraldo, Hull, and Felix.

Lead poisoning is a serious and entirely preventable children's health and environmental justice issue with lifelong consequences, affecting hundreds of Rhode Island children every year. In addition to the well-known threat of lead paint in older homes and contaminated soil, contaminated drinking water from tens of thousands of remaining lead service lines statewide contributes to these levels.

Children Entering Kindergarten with History of Elevated* Blood Lead Level Screening ($\geq 5 \mu\text{g/dL}$), Rhode Island, Four Core Cities, and Remainder of State, 2004-2022



Although the percentage of children with elevated blood lead levels is declining nationally and in Rhode Island, low-income children continue to be at higher risk of lead exposure. In Rhode Island, children living in the four core cities, where the child poverty rates are highest, are at increased risk for lead exposure because the housing stock tends to be older.

- In 2020, 631 (3%) of the 19,722 Rhode Island children under age six who were screened had confirmed elevated blood lead levels of ≥ 5 $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$.
- Children living in the four core cities (5%) were more likely than children in the remainder of the state (2%) to have confirmed elevated blood lead levels of ≥ 5 $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$.
- The number of lead screenings declined during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is no safe lead level in children. Lead exposure, even at very low levels, can cause irreversible damage, including slowed growth and development, learning disabilities, behavioral problems, and neurological damage. Though rare, severe poisoning can result in seizures, comas, and even death. The societal costs of childhood lead poisoning include the loss of future earnings due to cognitive impairment, and increased medical, special education, and juvenile justice costs. To better alert health officials and families to the dangers of any lead exposure in children, in 2012 the CDC lowered the threshold for which a child is deemed to have an elevated blood lead level from 10 $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$ to 5 $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$ and just last year they lowered the reference value again to 3.5 $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$. This new lower reference value allows parents and health officials to take corrective actions sooner.

New funds will allow Rhode Island to replace many service lines, resulting in safer drinking water for thousands of Rhode Island children and families. However, along with this historic investment, we need a solid and thoughtful plan. We want to make sure we get this right, because we may not get this opportunity again. **House Bill 5138 would create a plan for water utilities to replace lead service lines and provide more opportunities for property owners across the state to take advantage of available resources.**

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT also supports the additional language in this bill regarding community outreach and engagement standards that set standards and requirements for water utilities to report out numbers of lead service lines, and progress towards their replacement, as well as requiring that tenants and property owners be fully informed of the presence of lead service lines in their homes, and the associated dangers. We also support additional language around consumer protections and tenants' rights included in House Bill 5138.

1. Strengthened language around expectations & requirements for **community outreach and engagement**.
2. **Protections against water utilities raising rates** to cover costs of lead service line replacements or related loans.
3. Ability for **tenants to request and schedule lead service line replacements** when owner is unresponsive.

Thank you for the leadership that the General Assembly has shown on lead poisoning prevention and for the opportunity to provide this testimony.