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News Release

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SNHD to develop lead poison prevention program in Southern Nevada

LAS VEGAS - September 25, 2006 - The Southern Nevada Health District (SNHD) has received a first-of-its-kind federal grant sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to develop a comprehensive childhood lead poisoning prevention program for the community. The program will be initiated in Clark County but will be expanded to include the state of Nevada in the near future.

Lead is a metallic element that can be absorbed by the body and is listed as a known carcinogen by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Toxic Release Inventory. Lead poisoning is the result of a gradual accumulation of lead in the blood, bone and other tissues after repeated exposure.

"This is an ideal opportunity for us to address a preventable health issue in Southern Nevada. Lead poisoning creates lifelong consequences for children if not detected and treated quickly," said Dr. Lawrence Sands, SNHD's director of community health. "Until now, there has not been any type of grant funding to address this issue in Southern Nevada, which is currently a problem that we have in our community."

In 2006, approximately 1,000 children in Clark County will be affected by lead exposure that results in elevated blood-lead levels. "The ultimate goal of the (lead poisoning prevention) program is to eliminate lead poisoning as a childhood health concern in Nevada," said Wilbert L. Townsend, project director and a chronic disease epidemiologist at the Southern Nevada Health District.

The health district will work closely with UNLV's School of Public Health, and the Nevada Center of Environmental Health Surveillance (NCEHS) to assess lead levels in residences that will be investigated; to develop protocols for home investigations and inspections that are consistent with EPA guidelines; and to test environmental samples. In addition, SNHD will work with *HealthInsight*, a private, non-profit Medicare Quality Improvement Organization that works to improve the health care systems of Nevada and Utah, to perform physician outreach and education programs as well as community education efforts. "Education is key to how a community eliminates the problem," added Sands.

SNHD/Lead Poisoning Grant – add one

According to the CDC, nearly 900,000 children in the United States still have elevated blood lead levels. Young children absorb lead more easily than adults and they are more susceptible to adverse effects of lead. Due to the effect lead poisoning has on learning ability, particularly at early ages, children between the ages of 3 and 13 are considered an at-risk group. Lead poisoning can affect nearly every system in the body and can cause learning disabilities, behavioral problems and, at very high levels, seizures, coma and even death.

“This grant will allow us to develop more comprehensive protocols to determine if lead poisoning is present as well as community and parental education tools to increase awareness about how they can reduce the risk of childhood lead poisoning. There are many ways to be exposed but there are as many ways to prevent it,” said Sands.

Recently, it was discovered that candies imported from Mexico tested positive for lead contamination. After several local school-age children were found to have elevated levels of lead in their blood, it was determined that they had eaten Mexican candies that contained chili peppers contaminated with lead.

Adults are not immune from lead poisoning; however, the symptoms and health effects are often very different from children. In adults, symptoms include anemia, high blood pressure, kidney failure, wrist or foot weakness, depression, gout, fatigue, heart failure, reproductive problems and abdominal pain. Common symptoms in children include anemia and abdominal pain, like adults, but also include vomiting, tiredness, decreased appetite, learning problems, lowered IQ, sleeplessness, diarrhea, and constipation.

“Until now, we have not had the resources to accurately study the magnitude of lead poisoning in our area,” said Dr. Shawn Gerstenberger, associate professor and chair of the Department of Environmental and Occupational Health within the UNLV School of Public Health. “We will be working cooperatively with the health district to investigate instances of lead poisoning, evaluate potential sources of exposure and recommend abatement strategies,” said Gerstenberger. “Our ultimate goal is to prevent, rather than treat, lead poisoning in children.”

The total estimated project cost for this one-year budget period is \$2,768,185 and it is broken down as follows: SNHD’s federal grant award is \$529,891 (19.1 percent), which may be renewed annually for up to five years. The University of Nevada, Las Vegas, School of Public Health is contributing in-kind services and matching funds in the amount of \$313,240 (11.3 percent), and the State of Nevada is contributing in-kind services and matching funds of \$1,925,054 (69.5 percent).

UNLV’s School of Public Health was founded in April 2004 and awards both graduate and undergraduate degrees. The school has a special interest in community-based participatory research and offers its students the opportunity for applied research.

For more information about lead poisoning, contact the SNHD Office of Epidemiology, (702) 759-1300 or visit www.southernnevadahealthdistrict.org and click on Health Topics, the CDC Lead Poisoning Prevention Branch, (404) 498-1420, The Alliance to End Childhood Lead Poisoning, (202) 543-1147.