

Using Medicaid Reimbursement for Childhood Lead Poisoning Case Management and Inspection in Rhode Island

The Rhode Island Department of Health's Center for Healthy Homes and Environment program requested a policy change following changes to CDC's blood lead level standards to secure Medicaid coverage for lead poisoning prevention for children under six.

Lead poisoning continues to be a persistent public health issue in Rhode Island. In Rhode Island, lead-based paint is considered the largest contributor to children's lead exposure.¹ The state estimates that 80 percent of homes in Rhode Island contain lead-based paint due to their pre-1978 construction.²

Prior to July 2016, Rhode Island's Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) certified and reimbursed lead centers to provide non-medical home visits to Medicaid-eligible children with elevated blood lead levels greater than or equal to 15 micrograms per deciliter ($\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$). EOHHS also reimbursed for Comprehensive Environmental Lead Inspections (CELI) for Medicaid-eligible children with elevated blood lead levels in categories currently defined as persistent (two tests greater than or equal to 15 $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$) or significant (one test greater than or equal to 20 $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$). This became a problem when, in 2012, CDC lowered the level at which children are considered lead poisoned to 5 $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$ (previously 10 $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$) based on evidence of the ill effects of lead at those lower levels. As a result of this change, children identified with lead levels known to be harmful (between 5-15 $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$) were unable to receive Medicaid-reimbursed services from the lead centers.

- In 2017, the prevalence of lead poisoning in Rhode Island among children ages six and younger was nearly 4 percent (953 cases), compared to 5 percent (1,343 cases) in 2015.³
- In 2017, 677 children in Rhode Island were poisoned (blood lead level $\geq 5 \mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$) for the first time, compared to 943 children in 2015.⁴

Steps Taken

- To address this gap in coverage, the Rhode Island Department of Health's (RIDOH) [Center for Healthy Homes and Environment](#) program requested that EOHHS lower the lead level threshold for reimbursement of non-medical home visits to children with elevated lead levels (greater than or equal to 5 $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$) and for CELIs for children with single blood lead results of greater than or equal to 10 $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$.
- They presented information about the new CDC threshold alongside statewide data from Rhode Island with the formal request.
- EOHHS supported the change, and the new policy went into effect in July of 2016.

Results

- RIDOH expects to conduct about 400 more home visits and see 60 more CELIs per year offered to families of lead poisoned children as a result of this change. This means that many more children will begin receiving services that could prevent further lead exposure in those homes. Since the incidence of lead poisoning in core cities is greater than in non-core cities in Rhode

Island, and poverty is higher in core cities, these new services will likely benefit the children with the highest risk of exposure to lead.⁵

- The change in policy will impact and increase the work of the lead centers that conduct the home visits and inspections, but they will now be reimbursed for those services.

Lessons Learned

- While making changes to policy at the state level is a complicated and lengthy process, RIDOH credits its success to the longstanding relationship with EOHHS. The two agencies have been working together for more than 20 years.
- It was crucial to have the compelling and irrefutable data from CDC to support the change in policy, and the state-level data that helped RIDOH and EOHHS quantify the problem and predict new cases and associated costs.
- In the future, RIDOH will monitor the impact of this program and hopes to see the incidence of elevated blood lead levels decrease over time. The department will also work with primary care providers around the state to provide education and resources about the new policy.

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¹ Rhode Island Department of Health. "Childhood Lead Poisoning." Available at <http://health.ri.gov/data/childhoodleadpoisoning/>. Accessed 8-14-18.

² *ibid*

³ Rhode Island Department of Health. "Childhood Lead Poisoning Data Table." Available at <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1PY9H5kwseYPoLwm-WTm0oSD8x-sQ7RIF0IN-LWPUtFk/edit#gid=1263478879>. Accessed 8-14-18.

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Rhode Island Department of Health. "Childhood Lead Poisoning." Available at <http://health.ri.gov/data/childhoodleadpoisoning/>. Accessed 8-14-18.