

## Lead, Lies and Local Action

May of this year marks the centennial anniversary of American scientists and public health officials' initial congregation to declare the sale of lead-based consumer products, like paint and gasoline, unethical and unsanitary. While many countries had banned the sale of these products at the turn of the century, it wasn't until 1978 that the U.S. banned the use of lead-based paint in American homes.<sup>1</sup> Given that our country has displayed a history of neglect when it comes to consumer health, we owe our nation's children the chance to grow up without the fear of lead poisoning. And yet, following in the footsteps of his predecessors, President Trump has demonstrated his dedication to the lead companies' deceit. While he declared October 20-26th "Lead Poisoning Prevention Week", his administration simultaneously postponed the scheduled removal of lead from families' homes.<sup>2</sup> Such a tradition of deflection and delay will only exacerbate the problem of lead poisoning in our communities for future generations, as it is the decay of lead-based products into our homes and environments that poses such a dramatic health risk to our communities. Time is a crucial resource when it comes to public health. In squandering it, as has been done time and time again over the course of the past century, the current presidential administration is poisoning another generation, directly limiting their chances of success in this world. While addressing the adverse effects of lead in our world is straightforward and necessary, the alternative of doing nothing is an act of slow torture. We are surrounded by toxics; they fill the air we breathe, the water we swallow, the products we consume without thought. In choosing to permit them to permeate our atmosphere in perpetuity - without rendering liable the individuals who recklessly expose us to them via commercial sale - the human race is smothered. Only by acting to remove these toxics and obstruct their perpetrators can our health be ensured and protected.

Each of America's lead-based products has had its own infamous history of careful cover-ups. Lead-based paint is among the notorious sources of lead poisoning and additional subclinical effects in children and adults. As early as 1904, doctors had made the connection between a distinct set of clinical symptoms in children and the rise in sale and use of lead-based commercial paint. Until the 1920s, lead poisoning cases presented in limited and infrequent

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<sup>1</sup> Rabin, R. (1989). Warnings unheeded: a history of child lead poisoning. *American Journal of Public Health*, 79(12), 1668–1674. <https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.79.12.1668>

<sup>2</sup> Lazurus, D. (2020). *Trump's bald lies about lead paint policy*. Latimes.com. [https://enewspaper.latimes.com/infinity/article\\_share.aspx?guid=cdeb7768-3911-45c1-9696-ba6dff8103e9](https://enewspaper.latimes.com/infinity/article_share.aspx?guid=cdeb7768-3911-45c1-9696-ba6dff8103e9)

samples. At this point, however, the disease known as lead poisoning began to gain worldwide recognition, and the procedures and characteristics required for clinical diagnosis became clearly defined in medical literature. Risk factors for contraction and necessary countermeasures for prevention also took form. Several countries, including Australia, Great Britain, and Greece, banned or restricted lead paint usage indoors by the mid-1920s. Even the US Department of Health and Human Services admitted knowledge of its health risks.<sup>1</sup> And, in the 1940s, accurate blood tests became widely available, definitively naming lead as the culprit of such dramatic and deadly symptoms of lead poisoning.<sup>1</sup>

In innumerable incontrovertible and conniving ways, the Lead Industries Association (LIA) attempted to conceal the truth about lead paint, despite knowing of its health risks since the 1930s. Research on the impacts of lead on individuals focused almost solely on workers, willfully ignoring the supposed risk to children. Individuals such as Robert Kehoe, a notable spokesperson for the LIA and the medical director for the Ethyl Gasoline Corporation, were tasked with the obfuscation of the LIA's analytical process and mediative efforts.<sup>3</sup> While stating publicly that any evidence of lead poisoning in children should be dealt with swiftly, citing children's susceptibility via pica and their immunocompromised status, he simultaneously supported the LIA's suppression of evidence. This suppression predominantly came in the form of scrutiny; LIA officials strategized by invalidating any concrete data demonstrating widespread childhood lead effects. Numbers were categorically minimized. In addition, marketing campaigns for lead paint directly targeted children, with child-centric campaigns such as the iconic Dutch Boy, or alternative methods highlighting the 'hygienic' quality of white lead paint. This label could not have been farther from the truth. Robert Kehoe's most enduring legacy was to define a paradigm for the remediation of the lead issue as one of "show me the data". Without hard evidence, he argued, optimal results could not be achieved. By positioning themselves as the optimal source of such data, the lead companies shaped and restricted the flow of such evidence to the populace and to public health officials. They reframed the epidemic as a limited public health issue. Accordingly, despite quantitative evidence that lead based products were harmful, continued efforts to restrict such findings by lead companies resulted in a detrimental

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<sup>3</sup> Nriagu, J. O. (1998). Clair Patterson and Robert Kehoe's Paradigm of "Show Me the Data" on Environmental Lead Poisoning. *Environmental Research*, 78, 71-78.

delay to their ban. Because of this, 38 million permanently occupied housing units in the US - 40% of the total housing units in the country - still contain lead paint as of 2024.

Boston, in particular, with the second oldest housing stock in the country and notable underserved communities, is particularly vulnerable to widespread lead poisoning. It is here in particular that efforts to resolve the problem of enduring lead-based paint, or lack thereof, will be most consequential. This is why the President's indecision is so jarring to our communities. We must act now to remove these toxins and undo decades of wrong through increased liability laws and concentrated infrastructure efforts.

While the federal government drags its feet and funding ebbs with the political tide, the burden of lead remediation has fallen on local leaders and grassroots organizers to shoulder the responsibility. In the absence of national leadership and sustained investment, communities like Chelsea, Massachusetts are showing up and proving that progress is still possible.

Chelsea is a densely populated city just north of Boston, home to a predominantly Latino/a, immigrant and working-class population, with about 74% of residents identifying as people of color<sup>4</sup> and just about 20.6% living below the poverty line<sup>5</sup>. It is also one of the most environmentally burdened communities in the state. More than 70% of Chelsea's housing stock was built before 1978<sup>6</sup> (the year lead paint was banned in residential construction) putting thousands of families at risk of exposure. The flaking of this lead paint in older apartments, contaminated household dust, and deteriorating windowsills pose daily hazards. Children, who absorb lead at higher rates than adults, are particularly vulnerable to these risks. Many of Chelsea's residents live in multi-unit rental properties where landlords are either unaware of the risks or lack the incentives and funding to conduct a full lead abatement. Even when landlords attempt to remediate the lead risks from residential paint, the Massachusetts Lead Law only requires them to cover the lead paint - not remove it<sup>7</sup>. While covering may mitigate risks in the short-term, it may flake off, exposing the hazard underneath over time. Chelsea's rental tenants

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<sup>4</sup> **U.S. Census Bureau.** (2023). *QuickFacts: Chelsea city, Massachusetts*. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/chelseacitymassachusetts>

<sup>5</sup> **Census Reporter.** (2023). *Chelsea, MA - Profile data*. Retrieved from <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/16000US2513205-chelsea-ma/>

<sup>6</sup> **City of Chelsea.** (2023, December). *Fair Housing Plan*. Retrieved from [https://cms5.revize.com/revize/chelseama/Document\\_Center/Departments/Housing%20%26%20Community%20Development/Housing/Fair%20Housing%20Plan/Chelsea%20Fair%20Housing%20Plan%20-%20December%202023\\_Final.pdf](https://cms5.revize.com/revize/chelseama/Document_Center/Departments/Housing%20%26%20Community%20Development/Housing/Fair%20Housing%20Plan/Chelsea%20Fair%20Housing%20Plan%20-%20December%202023_Final.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> **Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services.** (n.d.). *Learn about Massachusetts Lead Law*. Retrieved from <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/learn-about-massachusetts-lead-law>

also are faced with challenges through language barriers, immigration fears and limited access to legal support which prevents them from demanding safe housing. This form of passive neglect amounts to an ongoing public health crisis in one of the most demographically vulnerable cities in Massachusetts.

Unfortunately, the lead exposure risk does not stop within the bounds of residential housing, but also from legacy contamination from the Tobin Bridge. For decades, the Massachusetts Department of Transportation applied lead-based paint to the bridge's massive steel structure, running through the city of Chelsea. As the paint deteriorates and flakes off, it settles into the surrounding soil and residential neighborhoods – many of which are directly adjacent to the highway overpass. Independent soil testing conducted near the Tobin Bridge has repeatedly found lead concentrations exceeding 1,000 parts per million, well above the EPA's action level for residential areas<sup>8</sup>. Families living nearby have reported dust settling on their porches, gardens and playgrounds, creating multi-pathway exposure routes through inhalation, ingestion and skin contact. And yet, until local groups raised the alarm, this contamination was largely unacknowledged by state authorities.

Peeling paint and contaminated bridge dust are not the only sources of lead exposure in Chelsea; hidden underground, lead service lines pose a continuous and often overlooked risk to public health. Chelsea's drinking water infrastructure includes hundreds of aging and undocumented lead service lines (LSLs) – the narrow pipes that connect homes and businesses to the city's water main. Many of these LSLs were installed before the 1950s and have corroded over time, allowing microscopic lead particles to leach into drinking water. While Chelsea's water meets federal quality standards at the treatment plant, it can become contaminated in transit through these outdated pipes. Replacing these lines is expensive and the responsibility for funding often falls into a gray area between cities, utilities, landlords and tenants.

In September of 2024, Chelsea received federal support through the Environmental Protection Agency's *Get the Lead Out* initiative which targeted efforts to accelerate the identification and replacement of lead services lines in vulnerable communities<sup>9</sup>. This initiative did just that for the city of Chelsea. The funding allowed for local agencies and grassroots

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<sup>8</sup> **Massachusetts Department of Transportation.** (2023, April 13). *Tobin Paint Chip Update Community Meeting Presentation*. Retrieved from <https://www.mass.gov/doc/tobin-paint-chip-update-community-meeting-presentation-41323/download>

<sup>9</sup> **U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.** (n.d.). *Get the Lead Out: Accelerating Lead Service Line Replacement in Vulnerable Communities*. Retrieved from <https://www.epa.gov/lead/get-lead-out>

organizations, such as GreenRoots to conduct crucial outreach, testing and pipe replacement work in neighborhoods that would otherwise be left behind. However, programs like this are now at risk. The Trump administration has proposed significant cuts to the EPA's budget, including slashing programs aimed at environmental justice and lead remediation<sup>10</sup>. Without sustained federal investment, initiatives like *Get the Lead Out* could cease to exist – leaving communities like Chelsea to rely on local community action.

Because of these legal and funding shortcomings – the need for joint community efforts has never been higher. GreenRoots, a grassroots environmental justice organization based in Chelsea, has become a frontline defender against lead exposure in the absence of robust governmental support. The organization continues to lead neighborhood-based education and mobilization efforts that directly reach residents who are most at risk — low-income, immigrant, and non-English-speaking families.

In 2024, GreenRoots continued its vital collaboration with the City of Chelsea to advance the Lead Service Replacement Program (LSRP), which aims to replace all public and private lead service lines in the city at no cost to residents<sup>11</sup>. This initiative includes a community survey to gather residents' experiences and feedback, with incentives such as Market Basket gift cards<sup>12</sup> to encourage participation. The survey is available in English and Spanish, ensuring accessibility for Chelsea's diverse population. Throughout this program, GreenRoots has been instrumental in increasing public participation and improving Chelsea's water service inventory, raising awareness about the dangers of lead in drinking water, and promoting environmental justice.

Additionally, GreenRoots has engaged in direct community outreach, including canvassing neighborhoods, distributing translated materials, and hosting meetings to ensure residents understand their rights to safe, clean water. Their efforts have been particularly focused on areas with high concentrations of children and neighborhoods facing language barriers, ensuring that public outreach and lead elimination are executed quickly and equitably.

These community-led interventions prove that progress is still possible, even in a time of federal stagnation. When national leaders delay action or dismantle public health safeguards, it is

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<sup>10</sup> **The Guardian.** (2025, February 3). *Republicans roll back lead exposure rules as public health experts raise alarms*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/feb/03/republicans-lead-exposure-rules>

<sup>11</sup> **City of Chelsea.** (n.d.). *Lead Service Line Replacement Program*. [https://www.chelseama.gov/departments/public\\_health/lead.php](https://www.chelseama.gov/departments/public_health/lead.php)

<sup>12</sup> **City of Chelsea.** (2025, February 28). *City of Chelsea, GreenRoots & Clean Water Fund Launch Lead Service Replacement Program Survey*. [https://www.chelseama.gov/news\\_detail\\_T2\\_R522.php](https://www.chelseama.gov/news_detail_T2_R522.php)

grassroots organizations and neighborhood advocates who rise up to meet the need. In Chelsea, groups like GreenRoots are not simply reacting to injustice; they are proactively building systems of care, accountability, and resilience. By empowering residents with knowledge, tools, and collective voice, they are laying the foundation for long-term solutions that center community health over corporate interests. These efforts demonstrate that, even without sweeping federal legislation, transformative change can begin at the local level.

But while transformative change can begin at the local level, it cannot be sustained without structural legal backing. Grassroots efforts like those in Chelsea reveal the immense power of community resilience, but without the ability to hold polluters accountable, such efforts remain reactive rather than preventative. In 2019, a pivotal shift occurred in California when the state's Supreme Court upheld a public nuisance verdict against ConAgra and other lead-based product manufacturers, recognizing that these companies had knowingly promoted lead-based paint for residential use despite clear evidence of its toxicity.<sup>13</sup> The decision initially forced ConAgra to pay hundreds of millions toward abatement, a legal victory decades in the making. Now, Massachusetts stands at a similar crossroads. Senate Bill S.1008 builds on this precedent by establishing a private right of action: for the first time, individuals would be able to seek restitution from corporations that knowingly placed toxic products like lead-based paint into commerce.<sup>14</sup> This legislation does more than redress past harms—it sets a critical precedent for any industry that conceals the dangers of its products in pursuit of profit. For cities like Chelsea, S.1008 offers the legal support community advocates have long lacked, bolstering local interventions with the power of state recognition and corporate accountability. For individuals, it represents a turning point, a means to demand justice, not just endure harm. Those who wish to support this legislation can do so by contacting their state legislators, submitting testimony, or sharing their stories. S.1008 is more than a policy; it is a promise to no longer accept the slow violence of industrial negligence and to finally return the power to the people most impacted.

One hundred years after public health officials first declared lead-based consumer products unethical, the crisis remains unresolved. This failure is not due to a lack of knowledge,

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<sup>13</sup> Mary Alexander & Associates, P.C. (2018, October 16). *Supreme Court of the United States Ruling Holds Lead Paint Makers Liable for \$400 Million Ruling*. Mary Alexander & Associates. <https://maryalexanderlaw.com/blog/supreme-court-of-the-united-states-ruling-holds-lead-paint-makers-liable-for-400-million-ruling/>

<sup>14</sup> *Bill S.1008*. (2025). Malegislature.gov; The General Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. <https://malegislature.gov/Bills/193/S1008>

but a lack of accountability. While federal leadership has faltered, communities like Chelsea have refused to remain silent. Grassroots organizations such as GreenRoots have led the charge, educating residents, replacing toxic infrastructure, and demanding action where the government has fallen short. But even the most determined local efforts cannot solve a problem of this scale alone. We must confront the corporations that knowingly placed lead into our homes and neighborhoods, and we must give communities the tools to fight back. Massachusetts Senate Bill S.1008 does exactly that. It empowers individuals to seek restitution and gives legal backing to the decades of grassroots work that has kept families safe in the absence of federal protection. Passing this bill would mean learning from a century of neglect and finally choosing justice, health, and human life over profit and delay. We owe it to organizations like GreenRoots, to the people of Chelsea, and to every child at risk of exposure, to act—not in another hundred years, but now.