



Statement and Remarks of Councilwoman Rebecca Maurer at the Beginning of Lead Poisoning Prevention Week, 2023

October 23, 2023

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This morning, Councilwoman Maurer spoke at the opening press conference marking the beginning of Lead Poisoning Prevention Week in Cleveland. Below are her planned remarks, which discuss achievements from the past year alongside challenges that the lead-safe program is currently facing. Additional context and references are noted and attached.

I'm grateful for the opportunity to speak at the beginning of this year's Lead Week.

As you've heard already, Cleveland's lead poisoning crisis continues to be staggering. In many of Cleveland's neighborhoods, more than 30% of the children have had an elevated blood lead level. Across the city, our average rate of elevated tests in 2022 was 17.4% -- double or more the comparable rates in peer cities across the Midwest.¹

The story of lead poisoning in Cleveland is also part of my story. I saw my clients at Legal Aid and my neighbors in Slavic Village struggle after a child tested positive for lead. It is one of the reasons I ran for office in 2021. Now, I sit as Council's representative on the Lead Safe Advisory Board and am now co-chair of that board. I am vice-chair of the Council's Health and Human Services Committee, which oversees lead-safe housing work. Like all the people you will hear from this week, I am committed to the belief that preventing Cleveland's children from being lead-poisoned is one of our moral obligations as the city's leaders and a necessary accomplishment to create a city where everybody can thrive.

As we head into Lead Week, I fundamentally believe that we're at a crossroads in this work. We've had some remarkable achievements. But there are also areas where we are struggling. This year's theme of collaboration is fitting because it evokes for me two of the big ideas of the work we have ahead as we reach this crossroads – partnership and problem-solving.

Of course, we have collaboration in terms of partnership. You can see from today's lineup and the progress that we've made that we've built strong partnerships in our generational effort to tackle lead poisoning in Cleveland once and for all. Hundreds of groups are involved in the preventative lead-safe work across the city. And here at City Hall you have heard how collaborations among groups like the Health Department and the Law Department have resulted in meaningful wins. We should celebrate never-before-filed prosecutions, innovative lead affidavits, and an un-heard of contact rate at our Health Department.

But there's another aspect to collaboration -- one we need to think about as we face down the challenges we continue to have. We need to think of collaboration in terms of problem-solving,

not just partnership. Because despite the wins we've had this year in reacting to lead poisoning cases, our progress has started to wane in terms of preventing lead poisoning under the city's lead-safe law.

Enrollments in the lead-safe certificate program have decreased for the last three quarters and are continuing to trend downwards. We need close to 2500 applications per quarter to be on track to reach our goal. Last quarter we had under 500, down from a high water mark of 1000.ⁱⁱ

At the Lead-Safe Advisory Board meeting last month, we spent time discussing whether or not it was time to "raise alarm bells."ⁱⁱⁱ At the Lead Safe Cleveland Coalition meeting two weeks later the numbers were called "sobering."

I think we've all known that there was always going to be a moment when we hit barriers in making Cleveland lead-safe. This is hard, important work and there's a reason nobody has succeeded at it before. So as we look at these decreasing numbers, the question is how we are going to collaborate, how we are going to problem-solve to keep our work moving ahead. That's what I want to highlight today.

Everybody who you will hear from this week who is involved in lead poisoning prevention is already problem-solving, already iterating -- they are changing programs, improving, and making strides to make sure that we realize the vision of a lead-safe Cleveland. I want us to be clear-eyed about what we're doing to problem-solve the challenges we face. While there are dozens of angles through which you can look at the complex problem of lead – workforce training, community education, screening and testing -- there are to my mind two key questions where we need to be problem-solving this year if we want our lead-safe program to succeed.

- *The first key question is: are we getting money out the door into the hands of property owners to make their homes lead safe?*
 - *The Lead Safe Cleveland Coalition's core incentive program pays landlords \$750 to make their homes lead-safe. We're spending the money and it is great when it works. But the processing time for checks has ticked up over 90 days.^{iv} What can we do to get that down to 30 days and really make it feel like "it pays to be lead safe" as the billboards around town say.*
 - *Our loan and grant program is also struggling. Lead Safe Cleveland's goal for the year was over 1000 loans and grants, but we barely got over 200.^v Since the start of the program, we've only gotten \$1 million out the door in loans and grants – that's less than 1% of the money we've raised to tackle lead poisoning. How can we ramp up this work to spend the money we've raised and get it into Cleveland's dilapidated housing stock as it was intended?*
- *The second key question is: are we building a program with real teeth? I heard recently from a lead clearance tech about his work. When I asked "what's the biggest barrier to you getting more clients." I heard back that landlords call him because they've heard about the lead-safe program and the first thing they ask him is "what happens if I don't get the lead-safe certificate?" Right now the answer is probably nothing. He said it's a quick end to the conversation. That cannot be true if we want this program to succeed. The Resident's First bill must pass and we must implement it in a way where Building*

and Housing has the staff and support it needs to use the civil tickets we've been waiting for. The lead-safe bill must have real enforcement behind it if it's going to succeed. And of course, these two ideas are directly linked because until the city enforces the bill, landlords won't have an incentive to apply for loans and grants to fix their properties.

That is why these are not simple tasks. They will require problem solving, and they will require collaboration. But they are absolutely necessary to fulfilling the promise of preventing lead poisoning and making Cleveland a lead-safe city. Despite our challenges, I remain hopeful because of the strong partnerships we've already created. This is the year we must harness those partnerships and turn them into problem-solving. I'm proud to join so many across the city in applauding how far we've come. And I am ready to work together, to collaborate, in the work ahead.

ⁱ See materials provided by Cleveland Department of Public Health by email to Cleveland City Council on October 3, 2023

ⁱⁱ See Lead-Safe Auditor Rob Fisher's Report submitted to Lead Safe Advisory Board

ⁱⁱⁱ Audio of the September 14, 2023 Lead Safe Advisory Board meeting can be accessed here: <https://cityclevelandoh.webex.com/cityclevelandoh/ldr.php?RCID=19974d76943c486becc6d368d662c27b>. There is not a recording available of the Lead Safe Cleveland Coalition convening I am quoting from. It took place on September 28, 2023 and I was in attendance.

^{iv} Discussed at the Lead Safe Cleveland Coalition convening on September 28, 2023.

^v See materials provided from Lead Safe Cleveland Coalition to Cleveland City Council on February 9, 2023. Slide presented at the September 28, 2023 Convening stated that there were 207 projects completed to date and \$1,092,285 in completed funding under the loan and grant program since the beginning of the lead-safe program.