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LEAD POISONING AND THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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I'd like to propose a 10-point program for local government on lead poisoning, because in combatting lead poisoning, the national government is extremely important, the state government is important, but the local government has the primary responsibility. It carried out more of the policy of the program than any of the other governments, and I think what the local government does determines what happens in the local area.

In a general way, I think there are two policies that a local government can follow. One I would call the policy of circumspection, which in my opinion perpetuates lead poisoning, and the other is the policy of eradication, and it is the policy of eradication that I want to advocate. But I want to present the policy of circumspection to you because it is really followed in some cities. To present it, I will describe an imaginary speech that an imaginary mayor might give to an imaginary conference. I want to assure you that I have no individual in mind, and that any resemblance between this imaginary speechmaker and any living person is purely coincidental. Nevertheless, this policy of circumspection has found its way into many cities, and I think it has resulted in not eradicating lead poisoning.

Now, I'd like you to imagine that this imaginary mayor has called a conference of commissioners and key personnel on health, buildings, on data center and on public relations, and he is going to address them on the city's lead poisoning policy, and this is the imaginary address, which I think presents the policy of circumspection:

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"Ladies and Gentlemen: I have called you to discuss our city's policy on lead poisoning. Lead poisoning is a terrible thing, and our city wants to do all it can to reduce lead poisoning and hopefully some day end it.

Lead poisoning has been with us a long time. We have done a good deal about it, we are doing a good deal about it, and we are going to continue to do a good deal about it. It is going to take time. We have to be careful and practical about what we do, because we want to help the people in our city and not hurt them, and we want a program that we can carry out and that we can afford to carry out. I don't want you to go overboard about lead poisoning. A lot of people are excited about it, but there are lots of other terrible things to take care of, too. Don't exaggerate lead poisoning and frighten people and stir up a lot of discontent.

The first think to do is to screen the children. That is important, because we can get federal money for screening. Screening makes our city's parents feel good if their children pass the test, and it shows we care about the children who have lead. Don't worry that we can't screen all our city's children who are exposed to lead. Just screen all you can, and keep on screening. In a few months, bring the children back and screen them again. I want our city to show the biggest possible totals of children screened.

Now, we want enforcement of the housing code, but it has to be reasonable and workable. We can't change everything overnight. We have a big backlog of housing code cases already. Of course, you'll find a bad apple here and there, but we have to rely on the good will of our city's fine property owners or we'll get nowhere. We can't begin putting all property owners in jail. I know that some

people want to impose daily fines and jail sentences in these lead poisoning cases, but let's be reasonable, and in the long run we'll accomplish more.

Try hard to make the landlords repaint the peeling paint and plaster. You can experiment with new ideas, but just do it on a pilot basis. The pilot program always shows our city is modern and on the ball. Maybe we can get some federal money to try covering walls with canvas or plaster, but that is very costly and our city could not afford it for thousands of dwelling units. Maybe some day there will be enough for all of them, but today it just can't be done everywhere and we have to do the best we can.

We can't make families move out of every apartment that has lead in it. Where would all those people live? They'd be looking for housing all over our city. All you'd do by moving them is stir up discontent.

Concentrate on trying to paint surfaces, try a few pilot cases of wall coverings, and have the Health Department report all cases to the Building Department, and the Building Department report all cases to the Health Department, and that shows our city is efficient.

We should pass ordinances, not too fast, but we should keep our ordinances up to date to show we are trying everything. As long as our city is reasonable and practical in enforcement, there is no objection to new ordinances. They show the people our city is modern and on the ball.

Now, we can't stop families from filing lawsuits against landlords for lead poisoning, that's their right, but definitely our city does not want to make its records of health available to people trying to make private profit out of these cases. Our city should

be impartial and not help such cases. They just stir discontent.

Our health records must show an improvement in lead poisoning. People want improvement. If we go ahead with our program, we are bound to show improvement and the figures will show it. Any cases of lead poisoning you find in the screening program should be referred only to the city agencies for treatment. We know more about it and can do a better job. Don't go referring cases to private hospitals. Lord knows what those doctors will say or do or find. With all this hysteria about lead poisoning, if you encourage private doctors to handle these cases, they'll begin calling every headache a case of lead poisoning. They'll begin saying a lot of well children have high lead levels and they'll begin encouraging a wild housing enforcement program and stir up discontent. Keep the cases where we know how to handle them--in the city agencies.

Watch the statistics carefully. I know they will show some improvement unless they are misleading. Our city does not want misleading statistics, and you have to interpret statistics properly --you know how to do that. Under our city's program, the figures should show that lead poisoning is going down. Maybe you can increase the age of the children you screen. We want only accurate statistics. And watch those deaths. A lot of overenthusiastic doctors, and some subversive ones, will be calling everything death from lead poisoning. Don't let that happen.

We know our program will reduce lead poisoning deaths and the figures should show it. If they don't, they'll stir up a lot of discontent. Nothing is perfect, but I want you to be sure to let people know where the blame lies. It does not lie in our city.

Remind them that the Federal Government is holding back the money, and the state government, too.

Remind them that lead poisoning is a matter of education. If a mother looks after her child properly, there is no reason for lead poisoning. I think we can get a grant to produce a film on how to care for a child properly and prevent lead poisoning, and then people will see that it isn't all just a problem of enforcement, but the mothers are too often to blame. Your mother and my mother didn't let their children get lead poisoning, and there was lead paint in our homes.

Remind them that the paint dealers are to blame, too, for not labeling the paint properly.

And be careful not to let subversive groups use lead poisoning as an excuse to organize. Deal with citizens individually.

Now, I want our city to get all the federal and state money we can, for screening, for new hardware, for new tests. That shows our city is up to date and on the ball. The whole story of what our city is doing has to be told to the people. They should know how many children are screened; that story can't be told too often. All pilot programs and new machines and new tests and screening programs should be told to the people so they see what our city is doing.

Now, once in a while the press will attack you. They'll be very unfair. All they care about is sensation and lies and selling papers and hurting the program. Never give them any information. All information must come through the public relations office. Do not talk to the press. But if the press attacks come and there is sensationalism about a child dying or enforcement or the

statistics, remember that our city's administration will stand behind you. Ride with the punch, because every unfair press attack comes to an end and is forgotten, but we wouldn't want to find that any of you leaked anything to the press."

That is the end of the imaginary mayor's talk. But the policy which I would describe is a policy of circumspection, and I think that policy of circumspection leads to the perpetuation, perhaps even to the increase, of lead poisoning.

And I would like to give you what I think is a practical 10-point program for local governments.

I think point one, which is the most important of all, is that the city must have determined to end lead poisoning. That is the basic point and that is the most difficult.

Second, the city government must pass modern, effective legislation. Legislation alone, without determination and without enforcement, is not sufficient. Even without modern, up-to-date ordinances, an effective program cannot be founded.

Third, enforce the legislation. Do it speedily, innovatively, and firmly. We have to find new ways of enforcing legislation, speedy, innovative ways of doing it effectively, and then doing it firmly. I think that fines and imprisonment are very, very important in making the legislation effective. And remember, too, that although housing is the most important kind of legislation to be enforcing, that air pollution is also important. They are finding now that lead poisoning comes also from air pollution.

Fourth, the local government should see that public health treatment of lead poisoning is done on an epidemic basis as to both

prevention and treatment. That is, the Health Department has to go after lead poisoning with same zeal in prevention and treatment that it goes after other epidemics. Dr. Dubose called lead poisoning the silent epidemic, but it is an epidemic and has to be treated that way.

Fifth, I think the city has to adopt a policy of the most extensive possible deleading and sheathing of the affected dwelling units.

Sixth, because the deleading and sheathing won't occur immediately and overnight, there should be interdiction of dangerous housing to vulnerable children. The housing should be labeled dangerous, should be posted as dangerous, no rents should be payable on it, and either immediately or very quickly it should be prohibited for occupancy by young children.

Seventh, the one policy of local government should be to obtain maximum federal and state aid. There is federal and state aid available, and that has to be obtained to the maximum possible amount.

Eighth, part of the local government policy should be to stimulate federal policy on lead poisoning.

Ninth, full disclosure of facts, full disclosure of everything about lead poisoning should be made public so that the statistics are accurate, the locations are given and the information is available to all.

Tenth, education, especially the kind of education that encourages local groups, local community groups, tenant unions, any form of organization, especially of the victims of lead poisoning, and certainly also of those who identify with the victims of lead poisoning should be an integral part of our program.