

# CITY OF BIDDEFORD, MAINE

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## PRESS RELEASE

### *Lead poisoning prevention highlighted during Week of the Young Child®*

BIDDEFORD, ME (April 9, 2021) — At its meeting this week, the Biddeford City Council proclaimed April 10-16, 2021 as [\*Week of the Young Child®\*](#) to raise awareness of the key link between the early childhood years (birth to age 8) and later successes in school and beyond. Against this backdrop, the City is celebrating year two of its [Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program](#), designed to safeguard the health of Biddeford’s youngest residents by reducing their exposure to lead in the home.

With an extensive stock of older housing (the median year built is 1952), Biddeford ranks 5<sup>th</sup> in the state for its number of childhood lead poisoning cases. Lead-based paint, commonly used in Maine homes until it was banned in 1978, is the source of the majority of the poisonings. Over time, the paint can chip, peel, or be reduced to a fine dust that is easy for young children to inhale or swallow.

“Deteriorating lead paint can cause serious and permanent damage in young children, especially those under age 6,” said **Tricia Cote, MPH**, a representative of [Coastal Healthy Communities Coalition](#) at the University of New England, a collaborator in the City’s prevention work. “Learning disabilities, behavioral issues, speech and hearing problems, and even lowered intelligence can result from lead exposure at this early age.”



*Above: Mayor Alan Casavant signs a proclamation declaring April 10-16, 2021 Week of the Young Child® in Biddeford.*

The City’s program takes a three-pronged approach: targeting older rental properties occupied by young children; paying for lead abatement -- up to \$100,000 per building-- to eliminate lead hazards; and educating professionals and the public about the risks of lead exposure.

Since launching last May, the Lead Poisoning Prevention Program has received interest from 16 multifamily properties with 61 rental units. Of these, nearly half of the referrals came only after a young child had become lead poisoned.

“It’s unfortunate because childhood lead poisoning is 100% preventable,” said City Housing Rehab Director **Gail Wilkerson, PHM-C, HQS-CSI**. “The good news is that our program identifies the hazards, and then pays to remove them, preferably as a form of prevention, but also after the fact.”

Because the lead-removal projects are funded by the government, a percentage of rental units applying to the program must be occupied by households earning at or below 80% of Biddeford’s area median income, which is currently \$66,301 for a family of four. Wilkerson said projects typically involve the repair or replacement of doors, windows, floors, and stairs, where constant friction degrades painted surfaces and creates the hazardous lead dust.

One property funded by the City’s program was 20 Wentworth Street, now in its final phase of lead abatement. **Janusz Jania** of AKJ Properties III, LLC, the owner of the 4-unit building, applied for funding last year and learned that the work would cost roughly \$40,000. He was pleased to learn the program would pay for the lion’s share of the work, and that the rental units would be made lead-safe for families.

“This is a great program, and I want to thank the City of Biddeford,” Jania said. “We have several buildings in this part of town and are looking seriously at having them all apply.”

Another beneficiary of the program was **Graham Botto** of 21 Kossuth Street. Botto purchased his 1860’s-era home in 2018 and began renovating it. The next year, at his infant son’s 12-month check-up, a blood test required by Maine law revealed the child had an “actionable” level of lead in his blood, or lead poisoning. The Maine Center for Disease Control became involved, discovered lead hazards in the home, and ordered that the home be professionally abated.

“We were given a choice,” Botto recalled. “We could train to abate the house ourselves, hire a licensed contractor, or apply to the City for abatement funding. Since we did not income-qualify for the government funding, we decided to train to do the work ourselves, and the City paid for that.”

Botto described his son as doing fine now, with no apparent ill effects. Still, he said he wishes he had known more about lead-safe renovating practices before he began rehabbing his house.

“It would have been helpful to have some basic knowledge about trouble areas specific to our home,” Botto said. “That would have most likely prevented lead contamination.”

Botto said he wants to use his experience to help inform other landlords and property owners how to care for both their buildings and occupants, with a focus on young children.

“It’s important to be proactive to avoid both poisonings and abatement orders,” Botto noted.

The City’s Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program is made possible by a \$3.2 million grant from the [US Department of Housing and Urban Development](#), a match of \$150,000 from [MaineHousing](#), and the

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support of numerous partner agencies and lead abatement firms. Over the next 2 years, the City plans to make at least 135 Biddeford rental units lead-safe for young children and their families.

To learn more, please call the city's Housing Rehab Department at 207-284-9105 x4144 or visit [www.biddefordmaine.org/leadprogram](http://www.biddefordmaine.org/leadprogram).

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