CAUSES OF LEAD POISONING

- Children are most commonly exposed to lead through the ingestion of paint chips and inhalation of dust from lead-based paint.¹
- A mother can transfer elevated blood lead levels to an infant during pregnancy or while nursing.²
- Lead-based paint is present in 75% of Illinois homes built before 1978.³
- 94% of homes constructed before 1940 are estimated to contain lead-based paint health hazards.⁴ Nearly half of Chicago homes were built in 1939 or earlier.⁵
- Particularly in playgrounds and around homes in urban areas, lead is present in contaminated soil due to exterior paint deterioration and the past use of lead in gasoline.⁶
- Other sources of lead poisoning include vinyl mini-blinds manufactured before July 1997, parental hobbies or occupations, water from lead pipes, traditional medicines or cosmetics that contain lead, food in imported metal-seamed cans, or lead-containing pottery.⁷

RATES OF LEAD POISONING

- Lead poisoning is the most prevalent, yet preventable, pediatric problem in the United States.⁸
- In Illinois, the rate of lead poisoning is consistently higher than that of the United States.⁹ In 2010, more than 3,300 children had elevated lead levels.¹⁰ In 2008, the rate of children diagnosed with lead poisoning was 175% greater than the national average.¹¹
- Nationally, 3 million (one out of every six) children six years of age and younger have lead poisoning.¹² 25% of children under the age of six live in a home with lead hazards.¹³
- The risk of lead poisoning falls disproportionately on low-income, minority children. Compared to Caucasian children, African American children are three times, and Hispanic children are two times, as likely to develop lead poisoning.¹⁴

EFFECTS OF LEAD POISONING IN CHILDREN

- Lead damages the developing brain and nervous system and results in learning disabilities, behavioral problems, developmental delay, seizure, coma, and sometimes death.¹⁵
- Childhood lead poisoning can lead to academic failure, juvenile delinquency, and high blood pressure, among other complications.¹⁶
- The effects of lead poisoning are not reversible.¹⁷
- Children are especially at risk because their small bodies absorb more lead than an adult’s, and their close proximity to the floor puts them in contact with contaminated dust and dirt.¹⁸
- Women with elevated blood lead levels can give birth to premature or low birth weight babies; these children are more likely to suffer from language and intellectual delays.¹⁹

LEGAL INTERVENTIONS AVAILABLE

The Health Justice Project works to prevent lead poisoning and address health problems resulting from lead paint. The Lead Poisoning Prevention Act in Illinois addresses childhood lead poisoning by requiring inspections, setting standards and enumerating penalties for non-compliance.²⁰ A warranty of habitability that certifies a home is safe to live in and no hazardous conditions—like lead paint—are present is implied in every lease.²¹ Under the Chicago Residential Landlord and Tenant Ordinance, which governs most rental housing in Chicago, the landlord must correct all housing code violations.²² In many cases, landlords are liable for repairs and monetary damages and tenants may terminate their lease without penalty. In addition, tenants may be entitled to damages under tort and personal injury law.
For more information on lead poisoning, see Lead Safe Illinois: www.leadsafeillinois.org.