



## Unfinished business

Since the early 1990s, there has been a dramatic decline in the number of lead-poisoned children in Maryland. Instead of 14,000 children testing positive annually for lead, the number fell to less than 10 percent of that last year. It's a great public health success story, particularly for lead paint-plagued Baltimore, where improving standardized test scores in elementary schools may have as much to do with the reduction in childhood lead poisoning as any school-based reforms.

But the job is not yet complete. Indeed, the statistical gains of recent years have been relatively modest compared with the '90s. More than 1,300 Maryland children are still harmed by exposure to lead each year, chiefly in homes and primarily because of lead paint and dust. The consequences of this are devastating - serious learning disabilities, behavioral problems and, at high doses, seizures and death.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has called for the eradication of lead poisoning by 2010. To make that happen in Maryland will require some bold new actions. Why? Because the job of removing the last of the lead from the environment has only gotten harder. The problem is most acute in the state's most substandard housing. Lead-free alternatives are neither readily available nor cheap.

The Coalition to End Childhood Lead Poisoning, a Baltimore-based nonprofit, has come up with a series of recommendations to bring the state in line with the national goal. They include more mandatory testing of older rental homes, stronger enforcement efforts, the creation of temporary shelters to help families relocate, more public outreach and a larger private and public investment.

Some of the ideas shouldn't be controversial. Maryland's next governor should be willing to invest in a state tax credit to encourage landlords to replace older windows and other lead paint hazards, or to place more state inspectors in Baltimore. Even many landlords have come to grudgingly accept the wisdom of lead detection and abatement, particularly when it spares them from future liability.

Advocates worry that one of the greatest hurdles Maryland faces is a sense of complacency. Yet local hospitals continue to admit children for severe lead poisoning. In Baltimore, nearly 5 percent of children test for elevated lead levels in their blood - more than three times the state average. That should not be judged acceptable under any circumstances.