

WITH PHOTO – AT BOTTOM

Local churches lead charge against lead poisoning
By JENNIFER HOEWE
The Township Times

Cleansing Saginaw area homes of their lead poisoning potential sits atop the agenda for some local religious leaders.

The Faith Based Lead Poisoning Prevention Project stemmed from these individuals' desire to improve public health, said the Rev. Marvin Smith, pastor of Mount Olive Institutional Baptist Church.

"We want to assist the community in freeing their homes of lead," he said. "We put our heads together and found a win-win situation for the community and its residents."

The project kicked off when representatives from three local churches teamed up with the common goal of educating the greater Saginaw County community about the hazards of lead poisoning, Smith added. Mount Olive joined New Birth Missionary Baptist Church and Greater Coleman Temple Church of God in Christ to work toward reducing the substance's prevalence in the area, said the Rev. Hurley Coleman, pastor of Greater Coleman Temple Church.

"This is a problem that's not going to go away," Coleman said. "We hope to reduce the levels of exposure by increasing education."

Saginaw County homes are of particular concern since many of them were constructed

prior to the recognition of problems incurred by lead, he said. Houses built before 1978 are at greater risk of containing products with high concentrations of lead, he added.

"The materials used then were considered safe because of their durability," Coleman said. "Now we're aware of the tragic impacts they've had on urban health."

To assist local residents in assessing their homes' lead content and provide information on how to address it, advocates from each of the participating churches underwent rigorous training, Coleman said. The training encompassed methods of lessening further health-related damage to those living within contaminated homes.

"This program is designed to educate homeowners, parents, children and landlords," Coleman said. "They need to be trained to appropriately manage households so lead does not become airborne."

When the contaminant becomes airborne, it has ongoing implications on those exposed to it as it hinders normal brain development, Coleman said.

"Once children are infected heavily by lead poisoning, they can't be freed from it," he added. "We have to teach them and train them to deal with what will be a lifelong issue."

As part of the goal to inform residents of all ages, the three churches called upon young members to create a mascot character. Chosen through a contest, the winning character, a cartoon pencil named Fred Lead, was selected to represent the

program. Fred Lead will be featured alongside five other characters in an upcoming comic book explaining the dangers of lead poisoning, Coleman said.

"This is a character that's easily recognizable," he said. "It's relative to both grown-ups and children."

The character's affiliated project took flight when representatives from the three churches applied for federal funding and were awarded a \$100,000 matching grant from the Environmental Protection Agency. By the end of this year, Coleman said he hopes to see 20 more churches join in the effort.

"We believe this could very well be one of the most educational and informative programs in the area," Coleman said. "We had no idea what we had touched on when we started."

The Rev. Marvin Smith, pastor of Mount Olive Institutional Baptist Church, introduces Fred Lead, representative character for the Faith Based Lead Poisoning Prevention Project. This federally-funded program's mascot will be used to help inform the local community of the problems caused by lead poisoning. (Photo by Jennifer Hoewe)