U.S. pushes to close lead testing gaps, echoing Reuters report

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U.S. states must do more to ensure that all children enrolled in the Medicaid health care program are tested for lead poisoning, a U.S. Government agency said this week, acknowledging major gaps in screening that were highlighted in a recent Reuters investigation.

In a bulletin published on Wednesday, the U.S. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) directed states to comply with requirements to test all Medicaid-enrolled children for lead at ages one and two. It also cited steps that state Medicaid administrators should take to ensure children do not miss the tests.

The agency’s guidance follows a Reuters report from June that showed how lead testing shortfalls put children at risk. The report prompted U.S. legislators to urge CMS to take action.

“I’m glad to see CMS is working to increase the rate of screening and reporting,” U.S. Senator Sherrod Brown of Ohio said in a statement on Friday. Brown was among 75 House and Senate members pressing the federal government to close the gaps, citing the risks of childhood lead exposure in his state. (Read the Reuters report here: reut.rs/1YgbjCX)

The CMS said its bulletin comes in response to the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, which “serves as a reminder of the importance of blood lead screening for children.” The agency also estimates that more than 4 million children reside in older housing “where they are exposed to lead.”

Childhood lead exposure, from sources like old household paint, tainted water or soil, can stunt cognitive development and lead to lifelong health impacts.

In the bulletin, CMS confirmed the broad scope of lead testing gaps detailed by Reuters, which obtained data from nearly a dozen states and found that just 41 percent of Medicaid-eligible children were tested as required in 2014.

The agency’s own records identify only 38 percent of Medicaid-eligible 1- and 2-year-olds who were reported to have had their blood screened for lead in 2015. CMS believes the actual rates were higher because the records do not include tests not reimbursed by Medicaid. Still, “the data does indicate that there are many children at risk of lead exposure that are not being tested,” it said.

Tests can cost as little as $7. Yet Medicaid administrators in some states were not aware of, or did not follow, the requirements to repeatedly test Medicaid-enrolled children, Reuters reported.

CMS said it was largely up to state Medicaid administrators to ensure increased testing, and suggested several measures: Collaboration with state health agencies to screen children who have not been tested; contacting healthcare providers to ensure they test Medicaid children as required; writing screening requirements into managed care contracts; and encouraging Women, Infant and Children programs and local
health clinics to offer more testing.

The CMS helps administer Medicaid, which provides health care for millions of low income children and disabled people.

*Editing by Ronnie Greene and David Gregorio*