

Day care parents look ahead

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FRANKLIN TWP. Parents and community members affected by the contaminated Kiddie Kollege day care center continue to push for long-term testing, with plans to seek corporate funding if the state's health department refuses.

The donations will fund a task force of four doctors recognized in the field with the intent of providing more exhaustive testing of the children, workers and community members living around the center, explained Gene Elwell, president of American Medical Saliva Testing.

"There is a lot more that needs to be done to determine what (are) the toxic levels of mercury for a child," Elwell told an audience of parents of former Kiddie Kollege students gathered Sunday at the township's community center. "The current levels are based on an adult."

After snapping on a protective glove, Elwell removed a small container containing a thermometer's amount of mercury. He suggested to everyone in attendance that "nine grams of mercury is enough to contaminate your child."

A previous blood plasma test conducted by Elwell's Mount Laurel Township-based firm found three people to contain mercury at toxic levels of eight or more micrograms per deciliter of blood.

Kiddie Kollege housed in a former thermometer manufacturing plant off Station Avenue was closed in July after state Department of Environmental Protection air samples showed elevated levels of mercury. How the day care center was allowed to open in 2004 in the former Accutherm Inc. building has been the subject of debate among state, county and township officials.

Elwell explained that a variety of long term tests from further oral swabs to spinal taps are necessary in order to paint an accurate picture of the amount of mercury still remaining within the children's bodies.

"Something has to be done on the long term," Elwell said. "More tests need to be completed, there is an opportunity here to bring in some of the best minds."

Mother Connie Davis sat alongside Elwell, explaining that mercury poisoning has sent her daughter Alexis' health into a steep decline.

"Alexis went to Kiddie Kollege for two years. Over those two years her health really deteriorated," she said. "They didn't know what was wrong with her."

As she spoke, Davis presented class pictures of her daughter, taken while she was enrolled at Kiddie Kollege. The three pictures taken over the course of two years show the slow paralysis of Alexis' face, with the right side of her face no longer able to smile, Davis suggested.

"You can see her face has no strength; her teeth are rotting; these kids need help," Davis said.

As the organizer of the testing task force, Elwell's firm plans to set up a non-profit organization to accept donations from corporations and private business owners with the intent of setting up a long term testing facility in Camden, providing a service at no cost to Kiddie Kollege parents.

"Much has to be done," Elwell said. "Your children need help. It is not like it is going to leave your system, no (level of) mercury is acceptable in any child."

The task force will be assembled of three doctors from Arkansas-based Hyphenated Solutions and a doctor from the Georgia Department of Human Resources Childhood Lead Poison Prevention Program.

"This is an independent study, these are independent scientist, but (the decision) is up to you," Elwell said to the parents. "You are the ones suffering."