

Private tests finds 3 have high mercury levels

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By LAVINIA DeCASTRO
Courier-Post Staff
FRANKLIN

Federal investigators found mercury in only one of the 22 homes of former Kiddie Kollege students tested, but private testing showed dangerous levels of the metal in the blood of three people exposed to it at the contaminated day-care.

The low levels of mercury found in that home was traced to a child's blanket that had been taken to the day-care center, the Environmental Protection Agency announced Tuesday. EPA officials said they will collect samples at the home again to confirm it is no longer contaminated.

"It's very gratifying to be able to report that so far, only one home has shown elevated levels and we were able to pinpoint the source in the home," EPA Regional Administrator Alan J. Steinberg said.

Different results

But Gene Elwell, president of American Medical Saliva Testing Inc., the Mount Laurel company that recently tested 44 of the center's children and employees for mercury, lead and copper, wasn't as optimistic.

Elwell's test results showed three people had more than 8 micrograms of mercury in their blood, which is "above toxic levels."

"I personally called each one of these parents to discuss the results and they had a lot of questions," Elwell said.

Elwell's results seem to contradict the results of previous testing conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta last month, which showed one-third of 18 students who had initially tested above the acceptable limits for mercury still had high levels in their systems, but the level was not considered toxic.

Different testing measures were used. Elwell used saliva testing to measure mercury levels in the blood; the CDC measured levels found in urine samples and the EPA used an electronic device to sample mercury vapors in the homes.

All rounds of testing were offered free of charge to Kiddie Kollege employees and students.

"I applaud the EPA for working with me to ensure these tests were made available to all families," said U.S. Sen. Frank Lautenberg, D-Cliffside Park, who pressured the EPA to offer the free testing. "Now these families can have the peace of mind that the environments that they live in are safe."

Former factory

Before the day-care center closed its doors in July, it operated for two years on the site of a former thermometer factory.

The owners of the center, Steve and Becky Baughman, whose son was also a student there, have said they leased the building and did not know it had once been a thermometer factory.

A legislative panel will hold a special public hearing next week to discuss the elevated mercury levels found in children who attended the tainted day-care center.

The state Assembly Environmental Committee will hold the hearing at 10 a.m. Oct. 18 in the auditorium of Delsea Regional High School.

Meanwhile, Elwell said he is working to assemble a team of specialists to attend to the families' needs.

"I'm getting letters from these parents about the ailments these children are having and it's heart-breaking," Elwell said. "They have nobody to turn to."

Reach Lavinia DeCastro at (856) 486-2652 or ldecastro@courierpostonline.com

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