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## **Illinois Foundation Makes Pioneering Investment to Address Childhood Lead Burden**

*Illinois Children's Healthcare Foundation grants \$600,000 to nonprofits to improve screening and access to evidence-based therapies for lead-exposed children*

CHICAGO—Illinois Children's Healthcare Foundation (ILCHF), the state's only private foundation focused solely on the health needs of children across the state, awarded \$600,000 over three years to Legal Council for Health Justice and Erikson Institute to innovate and evaluate new approaches to childhood lead poisoning.

Lead poisoning remains the number one environmental health hazard affecting children. Exposure to low levels of lead has been proven to significantly increase the risk of developmental delays, behavioral problems, and learning disabilities. The consistent link between low-level lead exposure and the reduced ability of children to do well in school suggest that lead exposure is responsible for a significant and modifiable effect on the achievement gap. Legal Council will pilot and Erikson Institute will evaluate the provision of Early Intervention (EI) – a statewide program that administers therapies and supportive services to young children and their families – to children with lead exposure in an attempt to prevent and/or mitigate lead's harmful impacts.

ILCHF senior program officer Amy Starin states, "Despite the known harm caused by lead exposure, systems of public health, medicine, and social services struggle to provide families with the necessary testing, education, supports and interventions to ensure the best possible outcomes for children. This work promises to reshape how Illinois delivers services to at-risk children."

"What we hope to achieve for children who have been lead poisoned in the state of Illinois is automatic eligibility for Early Intervention because we believe that these services, offered between birth and 3 years of age, take advantage of a time in a child's life when there is incredible neuroplasticity that may allow them to compensate for the developmental insult," adds Dr. Nicole Hamp, a pediatrician and LUCENT Scholar at University of Chicago Comer Children's Hospital, who will serve as the Physician Engagement Coordinator on this project. "Though we cannot undo the damage that has been done, we can give children who have been lead exposed and their families the skills, the education, and the opportunity to work around it and this is where Early Intervention comes in."

This groundbreaking initiative will be led by Amy Zimmerman, JD, a childhood lead and Early Intervention expert who directs child health policy at Legal Council for Health Justice. Early childhood experts Pamela Epley, PhD, and Samina Hadi-Tabassum, EdD, from the renowned Erikson Institute, will evaluate the pilot.

Pilot programs begin in three Illinois locations with high lead burdens – Cicero, Berwyn, and Rockford, IL – with the aim of achieving and informing eventual state-wide rollout of automatic Early Intervention eligibility for all Illinois children under the age of three who have blood lead levels at the CDC reference value of 5mcg/dL or greater. State-wide rollout would benefit thousands of at-risk children each year, most of whom are not currently eligible to receive Early Intervention. The pilots are partially funded by a seed grant awarded in October 2017 from the Illinois Council on Developmental Disabilities. Additional funding from ILCHF will take the work to new levels, giving it the potential to positively impact the trajectory of lead-exposed children across the state for decades to come.

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*Legal Council for Health Justice uses the power of the law to secure dignity, opportunity, and well-being for people facing barriers due to illness and disability. All programs partner with health and hospital systems to train and support the care provider network, provide direct representation to referred patients, and conduct systemic advocacy to promote health equity among populations facing chronic, disabling, and stigmatizing health and social conditions. [www.legalcouncil.org](http://www.legalcouncil.org)*

*Erikson Institute is the premier graduate school dedicated to child development. Erikson also provides direct services to vulnerable children and families, conducts applied research, and plays a lead role in influencing early childhood policy. [www.erikson.edu](http://www.erikson.edu)*

*ILCHF has a single vision: that every child in Illinois grows up healthy. Working through grantee partners across the state, the Foundation focuses its grant making on identifying and funding solutions to the barriers that prevent children from accessing the ongoing health care they need, with a primary focus on children's oral health and children's mental health. [www.ilchf.org](http://www.ilchf.org)*