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To lower risks of lead poisoning for Kent County families Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage awards funding

(Grand Rapids, Mich., Monday, Oct. 30, 2023) – Funding from the **Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage** is helping Kent County expand efforts to keep children and families safe from lead poisoning.

Nearly \$500,000 was appropriated in the county's 2024 Health Fund budget from the millage, which will fund two new public health educators and one new sanitarian. The new positions will help with investigation work being done in the homes of families that were found to have elevated lead levels in their blood.

"We are proud to provide this funding for Kent County to help decrease the risks of lead exposure for children in the community," said **Jennifer Headley-Nordman**, president of **First Steps Kent**, which administers the Ready by Five funding. "Exposure to lead can affect a child's brain development, causing delays, learning disabilities and behavioral issues, so it's very important to properly fund programs and positions that mitigate lead exposure for the children and families of Kent County."

The additional sanitarian will support an estimated 25% increase in the number of referrals the county receives for risk assessments and lead investigations and will help provide greater support to areas outside of the city center. The two health educators will work with community partners to build and implement a countywide health education strategy to reduce exposure to lead.

This program is important because there is no safe level of lead exposure, and the symptoms of lead poisoning – which can include developmental delays, learning difficulties and aggressive behavior – may not show up until there is a significant buildup of lead in the body. Children are especially at risk of lead exposure because of their hand-to-mouth behaviors. In 2019, the last year in which testing data wasn't impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, 695 Kent County children younger than age six tested positive for an elevated blood lead level.

For more information on minimizing the dangers of lead in homes, the Kent County Health Department [offers tips for safely cleaning](#).

The Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage served more than 12,000 children and expectant parents in 2022 alone and is working to help ensure children in Kent County enter kindergarten

healthy and ready to learn and succeed. In 2018, Kent County voters overwhelmingly supported the millage because they recognize the importance of programming that supports families and the resources they need to thrive.

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The Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage provides dedicated and sustainable funding for programs that improve the health, school readiness, and well-being of children under age five in Kent County. First Steps Kent is the administrator of the Ready by Five millage funds. First Steps Kent is an independent non-profit that works to strengthen and coordinate the system of early childhood services through research and innovation. First Steps Kent is leading a community-wide effort to develop a system of support for children ages 0-5 (and their families) that ensures every young child in Kent County will enter kindergarten ready to succeed in school and in life.