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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

August 26, 2008

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County Renews Efforts to Decrease Children's Exposure to Lead Poisoning

*Funding Includes Case Management Services, Home Visits, Medical Referrals,
Health Education and Outreach Activities, and Equipment to Test Lead Levels*

SAN JOSE-CALIF.— Even though it is the number one preventable environmental health problem in the United States, childhood lead poisoning continues to be a significant national concern. Census data from Santa Clara County indicates that approximately 6,000 children under the age of six live in poverty and reside in pre-1950 housing, a situation that could expose them to deteriorating lead base paint and a higher risk of lead poisoning.

Today, the County of Santa Clara Board of Supervisors approved a three-year agreement with California Department of Public Health, to provide \$1,451,914 in funding to the Childhood Poisoning Prevention Program. Administered by the County's Health Department, the program includes case management services, home visits, medical referrals, health education and outreach activities to medical providers and the community; and data and surveillance efforts. The Board also approved a request by Supervisor Blanca Alvarado to have staff examine and report back on a recent Environmental Protection Agency, (EPA), conclusion that lead poisoning occurs around small airports.

"We have a moral obligation to determine whether the lead fuel from our planes is having a negative impact on the health of our children," said Supervisor Blanca Alvarado, Vice Chair of the Board's Health and Hospital Committee.

Recent studies show that blood lead levels greater than 10 ug/dL (micrograms per deciliter) may inhibit normal neurological growth and development in children, leading to lower IQ, hearing deficits, speech and language handicaps, and poor attention span.

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"Every child we protect from lead exposure equates to winning a battle against lead poisoning in our county," said Supervisor Liz Kniss, Chair of the County of Santa Clara Health and Hospital Committee. "Our local efforts are tangible, as is our renewed commitment to provide better outcomes for our children."

Lead based paint from old houses is not the only source of lead contamination in Santa Clara County. In May, The Environmental Protection Agency proposed strengthening national ambient air quality standards for lead. Health officials stress that commonly used products in some ethnic communities present a danger.

"We are finding out that newer cases of lead poisoning are also coming from candy sources that are very popular in some Latin American and Asian countries," said Doctor Martin D. Fenstersheib, Health Officer for Santa Clara County. "Lead continues to be found in decorative pottery and can result in contamination when inappropriately utilized as a cooking or serving utensil. Remedies, make up and jewelry used in different cultures can potentially be another source of lead contamination."

Approved supplemental funding in today's action included a grant received by Environmental Health that covers the replacement of an X-Ray Fluorescence Analyzer (XRF). This piece of equipment used for testing lead levels in samples of all painted surfaces in a dwelling, unit or building is the method preferred by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to test their buildings for lead based paint.

A child that is lead poisoned sometimes does not look or act sick. When a child has symptoms like an upset stomach, lethargy, irritability, or a headache, a parent could easily mistake them for other common illnesses. It is important to note that neurological damage done by an elevated blood level is irreversible. Pregnant women should be very careful around lead because it can be passed to their babies.

The Department of Public Health advises residents who suspect that they or their children might have been exposed to lead poisoning to request an authorization for a blood lead test from their physicians, as blood contamination is immediately reported to the Health Department for follow up. Uninsured residents who want their children to be tested can contact the Department of Public Health at (408) 494-7410.

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Background on County Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Efforts

In Santa Clara County, the number of children exposed to lead has decreased significantly since 1997 due to improved lead screening education and testing by health care providers. A community health worker provides follow up education and referrals for children with blood lead levels of 10-14 ug/dL (low). Children with blood levels of 15-19 ug/dL (moderate) are case managed by a CLPPP public health nurse, and cases above 20 ug/dL (high) receive a joint public health nurse and registered environmental health specialist home assessment and continued follow-up.

Since January 1, 2005, 412 families have received case management services. In 2007, health care providers throughout the county tested 25,394 children under six years old for elevated blood lead levels. Studies show that blood lead levels greater than 10 ug/dL (micrograms per deciliter) may inhibit normal neurological growth and development in children, leading to lower IQ, hearing deficits, speech and language handicap and poor attention span.

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