Testimony in Support of H5007 and H5318, an Act Relating to Health and Safety – Lead Poisoning Prevention Act
House Committee on Finance
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The Economic Progress Institute supports Rep. O’Brien’s H5007 and Rep. Morales’ H5318, which both aim to reduce lead poisoning and its destructive impacts in RI.

Rep. Morales’ H5318 would establish a lead service line replacement program, using federal funds provided by IIJA for public and private service lines. Rep. O’Brien’s H5007 would establish a lead water supply replacement program for public and private service lines and require disclosure (to tenants and buyers of real property) of the presence of lead service lines.

These bills have the potential to reduce crime and improve outcomes in early childhood development, public education, and public health in Rhode Island. Considering lead poisoning disproportionately affects black families in the U.S., these bills would also improve equity in RI by reducing the disproportionate harm experienced by black children and families in the state.

Elevated lead levels in children have been linked to numerous developmental delays and behavioral problems. For example, lead exposure at young ages leaves children with problems like learning disabilities, ADHD, and impulse control problems. According to the Brookings Institute and 3 recent studies, lead exposure – even after accounting for other factors such as poverty, sub-par schools, and health care – leads to large increases in criminal behavior.¹ For example, studies found that exposing populations to lead in their drinking water causes much higher homicide rates 20 years later, relative to similar places where children avoided such exposure. A study specific to lead exposure in RI found that being exposed to higher levels of lead increases kids’ likelihood of suspension from school, as well as (for boys) the probability of being incarcerated as juveniles. The study suggests that the reduction in lead exposure (due to the switch to unleaded gasoline) may indeed explain a substantial portion of the decline in crime in the 1990s and 2000s.

RI children vulnerable to lead exposure and its lifelong detrimental effects deserve our protection, and all of Rhode Island will benefit (via improved health and less crime) from providing such protection. We urge passage of these bills.
1 New evidence that lead exposure increases crime (brookings.edu)