

Lead is gone at child care

S. Salina Street center is first of 13 homes that will be renovated under program.

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By Cammi Clark

Staff writer

Edith Roberts brags she now has the prettiest house on South Salina Street and, more important, the safest.

Her home at 3109 S. Salina St. is the first home-based child-care center in the nation, and the first of 13 in Syracuse, to be renovated through the Home-Based Child Care Lead Safety Program in an effort to protect children from lead-paint poisoning.

"It looks real nice. The kids tell me how pretty it is now," said Roberts of her yellow house. "I feel like a princess living in a castle, but the important thing is the kids are safe."

Today, program officials will announce the completion of work on Roberts' house, where she cares for four children, as well as the start of renovations at Mary Schweitzer-Burgmeier's home at 123 Parkside Ave.

New features, totaling about \$56,800 at Roberts' home, include roofing, siding, electricity and windows. About \$15,000 of that was solely designated to removing lead hazards, said Rebecca Morley, director of the National Center for Healthy Housing. The center, in partnership with the Enterprise Foundation, administers the lead safety program. They also collaborate with two local nonprofit groups, Home Headquarters and the Child Care Council of Onondaga County.

"Finding affordable, quality child care is hard enough without worrying about whether your child will be exposed to lead poisoning when you drop them off every morning on the way to work," Morley said.

Low-income, home-based child-care providers often live in older housing at risk for unsafe conditions, such as lead-based paint, and need safety-related repairs, she said. The 13 homes in Syracuse contain licensed child-care providers, have health hazards and were chosen from two ZIP codes.

Roberts' home-based child-care center is the nation's first to benefit from Operation Lead Elimination Action Plan money from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, which help low-income operators reduce health hazards.

HUD awarded \$930,780 in Operation LEAP money to reduce lead hazards and make other health- and safety-related repairs in Rochester and Syracuse homes where low-income families provide child care.

While Syracuse's rate of lead poisoning is four times greater than the national rate of 2.2 percent, its rate dropped from 11 percent in 2002 to 8.2 percent in 2003 as a result of efforts like the lead safety program, Syracuse and Onondaga County's HUD-funded Lead Hazard Control programs and the Syracuse Neighborhood Initiative, Morley said.

"By supporting these small-business owners, we not only ensure that quality child care is accessible for families in the area, but strengthen the city neighborhoods in which these business owners live and work," said Peggy Liuzzi, executive director of Child Care Council of Onondaga County.

During part of the renovation process, families relocate to 134 E. Matson Ave. Roberts spent about two weeks there.

Home Headquarters owns the transition home, which will be up for sale when all the houses are complete by spring of 2005, Morley said.

Schweitzer-Burgmeier is living in the lead-safe relocation home.

"I could not have afforded the cost to renovate, much less the cost to shut down during the renovation," she said. Seven children are registered with her day care center.

"Now, I can stay in business and provide a safe haven for my children while their parents are at work," she said. "But I can't wait to move back into my home."

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