

Ecology Center Tests Toys for Michigan Legislators

By Genevieve Howe

Amidst one toy recall after another, Michigan legislators and staff had a chance to find out what's in their kids' toys. Staff of the Ecology Center and Michigan Network for Children's Environmental Health took an X-ray fluorescence (XRF) analyzer to the Capitol in Lansing in early August to test toys for toxic chemicals.

Sponsored by State Representative Rebekah Warren (D-Ann Arbor), the "Take Your Kids' Toys to Work Day" drew about 25 people with a variety of toys, jewelry, and other items. Staff tested multiple components of each item with the XRF analyzer, which measures the elemental composition of products. It can detect lead, mercury, chlorines, bromines, cadmium, chromium, and other elements commonly used in consumer products. Chlorines indicate the presence of polyvinyl chloride (PVC plastic) and sometimes phthalates (plasticizers), while bromines indicate the presence of brominated flame retardants.

Jeff Gearhart, Ecology Center Auto Project Campaign Director, said about one in ten toys tested had at least one chemical of concern. "Most

lution is broken," said Tracey Easthope, Ecology Center Environmental Health Director. "States must step in to protect kids' health because the federal government has failed to do so."

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) is charged with protecting the public from "... unrea-



State Rep. Rebekah Warren observes EC intern Kathryn Kohls testing toys.

sonable risks of serious injury or death from more than 15,000 types of consumer products." However, the CPSC depends largely on voluntary guidelines and recalls — essentially com-

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panies are expected to regulate themselves. The CPSC has no legal authority to test children's products before sale. The government doesn't require companies to make public what is in their products or to label them so consumers can make their own choices.

While the U.S. lags behind, the European Union, Japan, and, believe it or not, China, are passing stronger

people think that the government protects us from potential hazards in products sold in this country," Gearhart said. "Tragically, this is not so." The issue has drawn international attention recently because toys manufactured in China have been found to contain dangerously high levels of lead. But, it's not just lead and it's not just China. "Our system of chemicals regu-



health protections and requiring companies to phase out toxic chemicals from consumer products.

Rep. Warren hoped to demonstrate the need for legislators to take further action to protect Michigan's children from harm — and to decrease the future costs to Michigan of disease and disability linked to toxic chemicals. "Children deserve to live in a clean and healthy environment," said Rep. Warren. "Michigan's future deserves better."

In June, the Michigan House passed HB 4132, 4240, and 4399 to address lead levels in children's products. Rep. Warren called on the Senate to approve these bills and wants the Legislature to "ensure further action to help protect our children from unnecessary and preventable harm."

Easthope said further action is exactly what is needed. "The state must go further to protect kids from a broader range of toxins in a broader range of products."

Toxic chemicals in the environment have been linked to the increasing incidence of developmental and learning disabilities, asthma, and childhood cancer. These conditions result not only in suffering but also in a huge cost burden to Michigan in medical care, special education, lost work time of caretakers, and lifelong decreases in the work productivity of children with permanent disabilities.

"It's an easy thing to do that can help our kids," said Rep. Warren. "We got lead out of paint and out of gasoline. We should be able to get it out of children's toys."

For more information, please see: www.mnceh.org. See also the results of the Ecology Center's XRF testing of children's car seats and car interiors at www.healthycar.org.

Genevieve Howe is the Ecology Center's Environmental Health Campaign Director and key facilitator of the Michigan Network for Children's Environmental Health.