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NEWS RELEASE

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Picente: Excellus BlueCross BlueShield ‘Community Health Award’ Funds Expansion of HEPA Vac Loaner Program

7 Additional Vacuums Will Aid in Lead Dust Reduction

Oneida County Executive Anthony J. Picente, Jr. announced today that Excellus BlueCross BlueShield has presented the Oneida County Health Department with a \$1,850 Community Health Award for the Department’s *Lead Primary Prevention* program. The grant was used to purchase seven additional HEPA vacuum cleaners the program.

“Excellus BlueCross BlueShield’s policy of community involvement and their understanding of the gravity and scope of Oneida County’s lead poisoning issue will make it possible for our Lead Primary Prevention program to expand its HEPA vacuum loaner program and more aggressively attack the problem of lead dust, so harmful to children, and so prevalent in the county’s aging infra-structure,” Picente said.

The industrial grade vacuums with special High Efficiency Particulate Air Filters are capable of removing 99.97% of lead dust particles as small as 0.3 microns which would easily escape a conventional shop-vac or household vacuum cleaner and be re-deposited on surfaces. The amount of lead dust that would fill a 1 gram sugar packet is enough to contaminate an entire unit and its contents at levels unsafe for human habitation.

Lead is present in most homes built before 1978 and painted with lead-based paints. If not well maintained, the paint deteriorates, particularly around doors and windows, as a result of the friction created by opening and closing. Lead laden dust often accumulates in window wells and can be blown around the unit and ultimately inhaled or ingested when the window is open or a fan is turned on. Window sills are often highly contaminated with lead and just the right height for children to hold onto. Subsequent ‘hand to mouth’ developmental behaviors expose children to extremely high lead levels.

The Lead Primary Prevention Program originally purchased four HEPA vacuums which were loaned to home owners who wanted to reduce their risk for liability by vacuuming units at least once a year. Two additional HEPA vacuums were purchased through the Lead Primary

Prevention grant in 2008 bringing the total to six vacuums available for use in high risk areas of Utica.

“The constraints of the Lead Primary Prevention grant required resources to be directed exclusively to Cornhill and West Utica, the program’s original target areas,” said Eve Van de Wal, regional president for Excellus BlueCross BlueShield. “Yet we recognized that there was a need for additional HEPA vacuums that could be used in many other areas of Oneida County that had older housing with lead-based paints,” added Van de Wal. “Through our Community Health Award program, we’ve been able to provide funding to help expand this worthwhile program that protects our children from the harmful effects of lead.”

Excellus BlueCross BlueShield Community Health Awards are grants of up to \$4000 for nonprofit groups for programs that improve the health and wellness of the community. Awards are made twice yearly – in January and July. Since their inception in 2000 more than \$530,000 has been awarded to nearly 200 community organizations.

The HEPA vac loaner program allows residents to call the Health Department’s Lead Primary Prevention program to reserve a vacuum for use at no charge from Friday to Monday or Monday to Friday. Each vacuum comes with a 5-10 minute instructional presentation on the proper use and cleaning of the HEPA vacuum; an extra vacuum bag, lead education and lead safe work practices materials. Anyone borrowing a vacuum must present a valid NYS driver’s license or other photo identification with address. Vacuums must be returned clean to avoid a \$50.00 cleaning fee. Residents may borrow a HEPA vacuum as often as they like.

For complete details on the HEPA vacuum loaner program visit the Health Department’s web site at ocgov.net and click on the Lead Information section; or call the Oneida County Health Department at 798-5064 and ask for the Lead Primary Prevention program.