

For Immediate Release: November 29, 2017

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State Initiates Testing for Possible Chemical Contaminants at Child Care and Preschool Programs Near Dry Cleaners

BURLINGTON – As part of a continued focus on protecting Vermont’s most vulnerable, six child care and preschool programs located within 200 feet of current or former dry cleaning businesses will be evaluated in December to determine if dry cleaning chemicals are present. Chemicals associated with dry cleaning can seep into the ground if not stored or disposed of properly, and move from the ground into the air of buildings through the foundation. This testing is precautionary. No one has reported being sick.

The Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) is leading the assessment effort in coordination with the Department of Health, and the Department for Children and Families. Families and staff at the six centers are being notified of the assessment effort. All parties will receive information about the testing results as soon as they are available, and will be informed of any further steps needed to ensure indoor air quality. Next steps may include more testing or installing an air quality mitigation system. Most solutions are straightforward and can be implemented in just a few days or weeks. Under state law, the owner of the current or former dry cleaning property may be responsible for covering the costs, but the state’s Environmental Contingency fund will be used to pay upfront costs for sampling and mitigation if the owner cannot or is unwilling to cover the costs.

“This effort has one clear goal – to ensure that children and child care and preschool staff are in safe, healthy environments,” said Agency of Natural Resources Secretary Julie Moore. “We’ve put in a lot of work to identify the location of dry cleaners throughout the state, including conducting historical research for establishments that have been out of business for many years or even decades. We are reaching out to child care and preschool programs in close proximity to the

identified dry cleaners to test and mitigate any possible risk with as little impact to the program and their families as possible.”

Moore said DEC staff identified 420 active and former dry cleaning establishments throughout Vermont. To identify which child care and preschool programs have a risk of contamination, the state used the industry distance standard of 200 feet from the dry cleaner locations.

Historically, dry cleaning chemicals were not disposed of as responsibly as they are today and dry cleaning wastes were often directly released into the environment. When these chemicals are inhaled, they can be harmful to human health. The State is focusing its efforts on child care facilities because children are more vulnerable to chemical exposure than older youth or adults.

State Toxicologist Sarah Vose, PhD, with the Department of Health said this testing is a first step, and does not warrant parents keeping children home from their child care or preschool program. “Just like with any other chemical that could be present in our drinking water or the air we breathe, the first step is to collect data to understand what chemicals may be present.”

Because this is proactive testing, it is unclear what will be found. Vose explained that if chemicals are present in the air, depending on the concentration, the State may recommend that the child care or preschool program relocate to a temporary facility while the building is treated to remove the chemicals. Officials said they will work closely with programs if temporary relocation is needed.

Throughout the process, all three departments will be advising and working with the child care and preschool programs, families and staff. Test results are expected to be available within two weeks of the test date.

For more information about dry cleaning chemicals and this assessment project, visit healthvermont.gov/dry-cleaning-chemicals.

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