

Federal agencies start summit on healthy homes

By Wendy Koch
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The U.S. government is ramping up efforts to promote the building of healthy homes free of lead, chemicals, mold, moisture and pests.

Four federal agencies are hosting the first national summit on the topic, beginning today in Baltimore. Several U.S.-funded studies will be unveiled that show how renovations in Cleveland, Seattle and New Orleans lowered the risk of asthma and other health problems for residents.

"Health doesn't happen in

the hospital. It happens at home," says Julie Gerberding, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Our goal isn't to be Big Brother, but people are asking for advice and information."

The healthy-home initiative has been growing for a decade, prompted largely by a push to remove lead from homes. It's merging with efforts to build energy-efficient homes.

"We're trying to build a consensus among environmentalists, builders and health advocates," says Jon Gant, head of the Department of Housing and Urban

Development's Office of Healthy Homes and Lead Hazard Control.

"We've hit a home run with lead," says Gant, noting that the number of kids with lead poisoning fell from 890,000 in 1992 to 310,000 in 2002. He says the U.S. government wants to use what has been learned about lead abatement to tackle other health problems.

This week's three-day summit is likely to draw more than a thousand participants — the largest gathering of people working to make homes healthier, says Rebecca Morley, executive director

of the National Center for Healthy Housing, a non-profit group.

"We have more people at higher levels interested in this," she says, but she adds that the government has yet to substantially increase funding.

The Environmental Protection Agency is using existing funds to develop a program, Indoor Air Package, that will give homes a seal of approval if they use certain building techniques to protect against radon, pests, carbon monoxide and other pollutants.

The package, in use in five states, will be launched na-

tionally as early as next year, says Tom Kelly, director of the EPA's indoor air program. He says it builds on the EPA's Energy Star program, which began in 1992 to promote efficient appliances.

Kelly says he wants to ensure that energy efficiency is achieved without sacrificing health.

A report this month by Morley's group found that all major green-building programs, including those of the EPA and the U.S. Green Building Council, have features designed to improve resident health but do not include injury prevention.