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THE KANSAS CITY STAR

EMPLOYEES SICK OF SUFFERING AT WORK TOXIC MOLD CONSIDERED AS THE CULPRIT OF HEALTH PROBLEMS AT OLATHE STATE OFFICE

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ALAN BAVLEY, The Kansas City Star

The Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services office in Olathe has been an unhealthy workplace for Kim Pearce.

Since starting work there about 18 months ago as a secretary, Pearce has been hospitalized for asthma. She's developed migraine headaches for the first time. And she now takes a long list of medications to keep her going.

She's far from alone.

One worker has been sidelined with pneumonia. Two have complained of chronic fatigue. And many have suffered from sinus problems.

"All the secretaries are sneezing and coughing," Pearce said. "There are a lot of us out here who are really concerned."

State officials have found what they said could be a cause of the illnesses that have plagued workers in the Olathe office since it opened five years ago: a toxic mold called *Stachybotrys atra* that thrives in water-damaged buildings.

"Obviously, it's a potential cause," said Darrell Cossairt, who is in charge of administration at the Olathe office. "We're going to act as if it is a hazard and get rid of it."

Researchers have linked *Stachybotrys* in schools, houses and offices across the country to the same kinds of health problems Pearce and her co-workers have experienced.

The dark, slimy mold was able to take up residence at the Social and Rehabilitation Services office, Kansas officials say, because the building is a virtual sieve. Water has come in around doors, up through the foundation and in through the roof.

Building materials containing cellulose, such as wood, plaster board, ceiling

tiles and carpet, are vulnerable to *Stachybotrys* when they get wet.

“The roof has leaked here from day one,” said Social and Rehabilitation Services area director Mike VanLandingham. “This has to be fixed or this building is uninhabitable.”

The office stands in an open field within eyeshot of the Great Mall of the Great Plains. It's a sprawling warren of cubicles where almost 200 workers handle welfare, food stamps, medical assistance, child-abuse investigations, foster care and other social services in Johnson County.

Each day they see about 100 clients.

A committee of employees began surveying workers this month to find out the extent of their health problems. Social and Rehabilitation Services officials are seeking advice from engineering firms to determine how much of the building is contaminated and how it can be cleaned up safely.

They are insisting their landlord, Kansa Development Corp., in Junction City, plug the leaks. The state pays about \$273,000 in rent annually for the 38,500-square-foot building.

“I see a whole new level of concern on their part since we came up with this mold thing,” VanLandingham said.

Gery Schoenrock of Kansa Development Corp. said he is committed to making the building safe.

“This is not my style, to have a building like this with ongoing problems,” he said. “We are not going to give up. We don't take these kinds of things lightly.”

Water intrusion in the building is so common it has become a running joke among the workers who have to mop off their desks after a heavy rain. One time, they put goldfish in ponded water outside the building. They've also planted plastic mushrooms in a wet cubicle.

“The carpet would be soaked to the point where you stepped on it, the water would splash,” said Marilyn Hagg, who supervises social workers.

Hagg hasn't had any health problems she's associated with the building. But Jim Jordan, a co-worker who helped clean the mess in her office after one rainstorm, has had his share.

“The stink of the water on the carpet was really bad,” Jordan said. “To be close to it just burned your nose. Whatever it was got so bad my nose and throat were swelling up and I had to leave.”

Staff began complaining about sinus problems about six months after the

building opened in 1994. The Kansas Department of Human Resources conducted air tests in the building twice in 1995 but found nothing out of the ordinary other than slightly elevated levels of mold and carbon dioxide within accepted standards.

“Basically, I took this as a clean bill of health,” Cossairt said. “We didn't find *Stachybotrys* in the air.”

Complaints persisted. One worker told Cossairt her doctor suggested the building might be causing her recurrent sinus infections.

The state inspected a third time in May this year. Again, inspectors found high levels of carbon dioxide which would require better ventilation. But they also took samples of fiberboard, carpet and other materials from various places in the building. In four of five samples tested, *Stachybotrys* was found. Scientists have not determined a safe level of *Stachybotrys* exposure.

“That elevated it to a higher level of concern,” Cossairt said.

Stachybotrys can cause allergic reactions. It also produces spores containing toxins that can cause illness and even death.

In Cleveland, researchers linked *Stachybotrys* to severe and sometimes fatal lung bleeding in infants. Other scientists have tied the mold to cases of sick building syndrome, a collection of maladies that include runny eyes and noses and flulike symptoms caused by indoor air pollution.

Scientists at Children's Mercy Hospital in Kansas City have found *Stachybotrys* in one-third of the homes and other buildings they've inspected while looking for causes of unexplained or hard-to-treat illnesses.

After torrential rains last summer, *Stachybotrys* forced the Missouri Division of Youth Services to close a children's program at its Wyandotte Street office downtown. The children now attend a similar program on Main Street.

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