A nonprofit health group in East Harlem says a sharp increase in referrals to its asthma program in the wake of last spring's gas explosion in the neighborhood is raising concerns that the blast hurt the respiratory health of some residents.

LSA Family Health Service said it received 52 referrals to its environmental health program between the beginning of March and the end of May, up from 17 in the three months between December and February and up 63% from the year-earlier period.

The group said the increase was due in large part to referrals for families who lived near the site of the deadly March 12 explosion and who had concerns about asthma, lead dust or pest control linked to the explosion and afterward.

Of 22 families who were referred to the program, 11 had problems with asthma and four had other respiratory concerns.

The figures aren't conclusive, and some experts think pre-existing housing conditions such as mold and cockroach problems are the more likely cause of the asthma complaints. At the same time, they illustrate the difficulty of pinpointing the precise cause of asthma in inner-city residents.

Experts said that it would be difficult to link the dust released by the explosion to asthma attacks in the area, which often involve a number of factors. Stress, they said, can also be linked to asthma attacks.

"That is a very tall order...to prove that there's an association especially when something has so many factors," said Perry Sheffield, an assistant professor of pediatrics and preventive medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital in East Harlem.

The explosion leveled buildings and killed eight people. In the weeks after the blast, "We figured that we'd get some referrals, but I didn't realize how many we would get," said Ray Lopez, director of the environmental health and family asthma program for LSA Family Health.

The group tapped the Mayor's Fund to Advance New York to help with post-blast health issues.

LSA Family Health representatives visited families referred to its respiratory health program to help clean residents' apartments.

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