



State of New Hampshire

Office of the Child Advocate

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Director

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Child Advocate marks first day of Child Abuse and Prevention Month with a call for vigilance during COVID-19 Stay Home Order.

Concord: April is National Child Abuse Prevention Month. The Office of the Child Advocate released a statement today calling on all New Hampshire residents to be watchful for signs of child abuse and neglect in their communities. Moira O'Neill, Director of the Office, noted that the purpose of a month devoted to preventing child abuse has never been more important than it is in the time of COVID-19 and Stay at Home Orders. "Common stresses known to contribute to child abuse such as economic insecurity, unemployment, limited access to medical and mental health supports and other stressors have been exponentially multiplied with parents out of work and schools closed," said O'Neill. She warned about increasing stress as a result of confinement and disrupted routines.

The fact that a month-long awareness measure is necessary underscores the difficulties many families face on any given day. In 2018 the Division for Children Youth and Families (DCYF) received approximately 30,000 calls of suspected abuse and neglect. In the time of COVID-19 restrictions, risk factors predict those reports should increase. But DCYF is reporting referrals to their hotline have been halved with children out of school and out of sight. O'Neill underscored the importance of having data on any changes in the volume and nature of calls, stating that DCYF reportedly plans to release data on calls received, along with changes they are seeing. "We need the details of the calls coming in so we can identify the children at greatest risk." O'Neill said. But to neighbors, extended family, delivery people, and anyone who can, O'Neill urged a sharp eye and a kind message for parents and children living under stress. To learn to recognize child abuse and report it she refers to Knowandtell.org or (603) 864-0216.

O'Neill pointed to pre-COVID-19 research reported by Prevent Child Abuse America¹ describing 94% of parents needing help, 86% who would welcome supports like childcare or other services, but only 20% actually asking for help. "Even parents who will ask for help may not know where to ask now that services are limited and many places are closed," O'Neill warned. She urged all of us to be prepared to offer suggestions for help, including contacting: 211 Infoline to find out about available services and help lines; DCYF Central Intake (800) 894-5533 (in-state) or (603) 271-6562 to report suspected abuse; New Hampshire's chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI-NH) (603) 225-5359, or the Childhelp Hotline at 1-800-4-A-CHILD to speak or text with a crisis counselor.

"Risk of child abuse increases with stress and lack of supports," O'Neill said, "We need to be checking in with neighbors and making sure children are safe." O'Neill lamented the term "social distance" suggesting "physical distance" prevents spread of virus, social distance increases isolation and stress. The Director urged New Hampshire residents to connect in every way safely possible with children and parents, and offer support.

Pursuant to NH RSA 170-G:18, the Office of the Child Advocate provides independent oversight of DCYF to assure that the best interests of children are being protected.

¹ Prevent Child Abuse America, (undated). <https://preventchildabuse.org/latest-activity/prevent-child-abuse-america-encourages-do-more-of-what-you-love-to-help-families-thrive-this-april-child-abuse-prevention-month/>

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