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Children's Advocacy Institute



University of San Diego School of Law
5998 Alcalá Park / San Diego, CA 92110
(619) 260-4806 / (619) 260-4753 (Fax)

1107 Ninth Street, Suite 880
Sacramento, CA 95814 / (916) 844-5646

1023 15th Street NW, Suite 401
Washington, DC 20005 / (917) 371-5191

Reply to: San Diego Sacramento Washington
info@caichildlaw.org / www.caichildlaw.org

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Contact: Amy Harfeld, (619) 260-4806
amyharf@hotmail.com

Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities Releases Final Report—Once in a Generation Opportunity for the Administration and Congress to Act to Save Children's Lives

Comprehensive report calls for \$1 billion influx in child welfare funding, new and stronger laws, and greater coordination, transparency, oversight, and enforcement across all levels of government.

WASHINGTON, D.C. – This morning, the Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities (CECANF) released its long-awaited report to the President and Congress. The 170-page report incorporates key findings from its meetings across the country over the past two years, as well as best practices, information and insight from experts from every corner of the field, and a set of bold and far-reaching recommendations spanning from the federal to the local level, all with the aim of preventing child deaths from abuse and neglect.

CECANF was established by the Protect Our Kids Act of 2012 to develop a national strategy and recommendations for reducing child fatalities resulting from abuse and neglect. The establishment of the Commission followed numerous congressional hearings, a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report reviewing this issue, as well as reports and exposés from advocacy groups including the Children's Advocacy Institute (CAI). Beginning in 2014, twelve Commissioners, appointed by the president and Congress, began a two-year process of holding public hearings in 11 jurisdictions to hear from state leaders, local and tribal leaders, child protection and safety staff, advocates, parents, and more. CAI was the only watchdog group to follow CECANF's activity and progress at nearly every meeting, testifying to the Commission in June 2016, and maintaining constant pressure and attention as Commissioners dug in to their formidable task.

CAI's National Policy Director, Amy Harfeld, who was instrumental in helping to shape the formation of and keep an eagle-eye on the Commission, reacted to the report, "We are gratified that the Commission came out with such a bold report, calling for immediate action to stop the crisis of child maltreatment fatalities in America." Said Harfeld, "This diverse and committed group put forward a bold call for major reform encompassing greater investments in child welfare and calling for stronger laws, better coordination, and a greater commitment to transparency and accountability at every level. This will certainly move us towards saving children's lives."

Key Findings of the Commission include:

- An estimated **four to eight children a day, every day, die** from abuse and neglect.

- Children who die from abuse and neglect are overwhelmingly young; approximately one-half are less than a year old, and 75 percent are under 3 years of age.
- Many states are out of compliance with federal reporting and disclosure mandates, and are not being held accountable for their performance by the federal government.
- Current funding of federal and state child welfare laws is woefully inadequate to effectively serve the families and children the child welfare system is meant to protect.
- Lack of federal and state investments lead to untenably high caseloads, a lack of family support services, and inadequate investigations all which contribute to the high rate of fatalities.

Key Recommendations Include:

- An immediate surge in which states immediately undertake a retrospective review of fatalities from the previous five years to identify systemic weaknesses and flaws, and to identify and reach out to children who may be at immediate risk of fatalities.
- At least a \$1 billion infusion into the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), currently funded at just \$25 million per year.
- Improve transparency and data collection efforts by creating more uniform definitions and tying state receipt of federal dollars to full and timely disclosure of fatalities.
- Elevate the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ (HHS’) Children’s Bureau to report directly to the Secretary of HHS who will report on fatalities regularly to the President.
- A call for Congress to conduct joint committee hearings on child safety, provide financial resources to support states, and encourage innovation to reduce fatalities.
- Convene a standing Interagency Coordinating Council to focus federal efforts to prevent and reduce child abuse and neglect fatalities.
- Establish a Federally Funded Research and Development Center (FFRDC) on Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities to collect and share data with the states to inform policy and practice improvements.

“We have waited with great anticipation for this Commission to release its findings and recommendations. We believe that its report offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity—no, make that mandate—for the President and Congress to take swift and decisive action to implement these recommendations. Children’s lives are at stake. Literally,” **reacted Professor Robert C. Fellmeth, founder and Executive Director of the Children’s Advocacy Institute and Price Professor of Public Interest Law at the University of San Diego School of Law.** “We look forward to taking this report and using it to help drive critical reforms.”

The last time a governmental entity elevated this issue to this stature was over 20 years ago in 1995 when the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect released, “A Nation’s Shame,” its report and recommendations to reduce fatalities. **Says Harfeld,** “We have a short attention span on policy in this country. The time to act on the critical findings and recommendations of this report is now — before the next horrible headline about a starved baby or beaten child hits the headlines.”

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About the Children’s Advocacy Institute —The Children’s Advocacy Institute, of the University of San Diego School of Law, works to improve the health, safety, and well-being of children. In addition to its academic component, CAI engages in regulatory and legislative advocacy, impact litigation and public education in order to ensure that children’s interests are represented effectively whenever and wherever government makes policy and budget decisions that will impact them. Visit www.caichildlaw.org.