



TO: Chair Gelser, Vice-Chair Anderson, & Members of the Senate Committee on Human Services, Mental Health and Recovery
FROM: Disability Rights Oregon (DRO)
DATE: March 25, 2021
RE: DRO 's Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 556 - Insuring On Site Inspections

Dear Chairs and Members of the Committee:

Disability Rights Oregon (DRO) submits this testimony in support of Senate Bill 556 requiring on site inspections for child-caring agencies including foster homes, youth residential facilities, and hospice programs. On site inspections are critical especially during the COVID-19 pandemic for two reasons: 1) the risk of infection in congregate care facilities and 2) the sharp, concerning drop in the number of abuse reporting.

The Risk

Since the very beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Disability Rights Oregon has received a steady stream of calls and letters from people with disabilities about failure to get the services to keep them safe during the COVID-19 pandemic including ensuring facility staff appropriately using personal protective equipment (PPE) and lacking access to PPE and sanitation supplies, potentially exposed both residents and staff. Oregon Health Authority's data demonstrating COVID-19's disproportionate impact on individuals in congregate care with underlying conditions underscores the seriousness of these safety concerns. It would be difficult to determine the appropriate use and access to PPE outside an on site inspection. It is highly unlikely that facility records would indicate staff who failed to consistently or appropriately wear PPE. For example, DRO confirmed during an on site visit of an OYA facility that staff were not keeping their masks on both their nose and mouth or were simply using bandanas to cover their face.

A Precipitous Drop in Abuse Reports

The drop in abuse reports also indicate a need for on site inspections. In March 2020, the first month of the statewide shut down, DHS reported, "Compared to this time last month, reports of abuse and neglect have gone down just about 70%." The reason for the precipitous drop for youth was, "Kids across Oregon are not in school right now, so they're missing that time around mandatory reporters." See enclosed *Child Abuse Reports Drop 70% In 1 Month, Leaving Oregon Officials Concerned*. In April 2020, DHS confirmed that it was "extremely concerning" to go from taking more than 700 calls a day alleging child abuse to averaging fewer than 300 calls a day in the last few weeks. See enclosed *'We know things aren't OK': Oregon child abuse advocates worry about drop in calls amid pandemic.*

Ultimately, on-site inspections are a critical safety net to catch and mitigate the harm to some of our most vulnerable populations during a pandemic when protective services are needed the most.

Disability Rights Oregon (DRO). For more than 40 years, we have served as Oregon's federally authorized and funded Protection & Advocacy System. DRO is committed to ensuring the civil rights of all people are protected and enforced.

Child Abuse Reports Drop 70% In 1 Month, Leaving Oregon Officials Concerned



By **Meerah Powell** (OPB)

March 28, 2020 10:58 a.m.

With schools closed across the state, officials with Oregon's Department of Human Services are concerned about a swift decline in reports to the state's child abuse hotline.

"Compared to this time last month, reports of abuse and neglect have gone down just about 70%," DHS spokesman Jake Sunderland said. "And we're seeing the same thing with investigations of child abuse that our staff are doing. Those investigation assignments are down 72%."

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Though the state can see a drop in child abuse and neglect reports over the past month, it cannot provide a year-to-year comparison, because the child abuse hotline went from a county-based service to statewide last April, Sunderland said.

He said the numbers the state does have, however, show a steep the decline in reports.

"On Feb. 19, a Wednesday, we had 834 calls reporting child abuse and neglect," Sunderland said. "On Wednesday, March 25, we had 246."



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other staff that are frequently around children in schools, he said. Other mandatory reporters include doctors, dentists and licensed therapists.

“When a child is at school, they’re spending a significant portion of the day with mandatory reporters that are trained and expected to be hyper-aware of the signs of abuse and neglect,” he said. “Kids across Oregon are not in school right now, so they’re missing that time around mandatory reporters.”

That’s a major concern for the agency, compounded by the social isolation the coronavirus pandemic has brought to households.

“As social isolation sets in, in order to slow the curve of the spread of coronavirus, kids and families are interacting with less people,” Sunderland said. “Kids have less eyes on them and less opportunities to recognize and suspect abuse and neglect.

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Sunderland said most cases of abuse and neglect are the result of some sort of crisis within a family – whether it’s related to mental health, economic instability, general stress or trauma.

“As people across the state are stressed out, they don’t have a release. They can’t go for a walk [alone] or go out to the store to get a break. They can’t go to work,” he said. “They’re concerned about money. They’re concerned about their health. They’re concerned about the state of the world. All of these stress factors are also risk factors for abuse and neglect.”

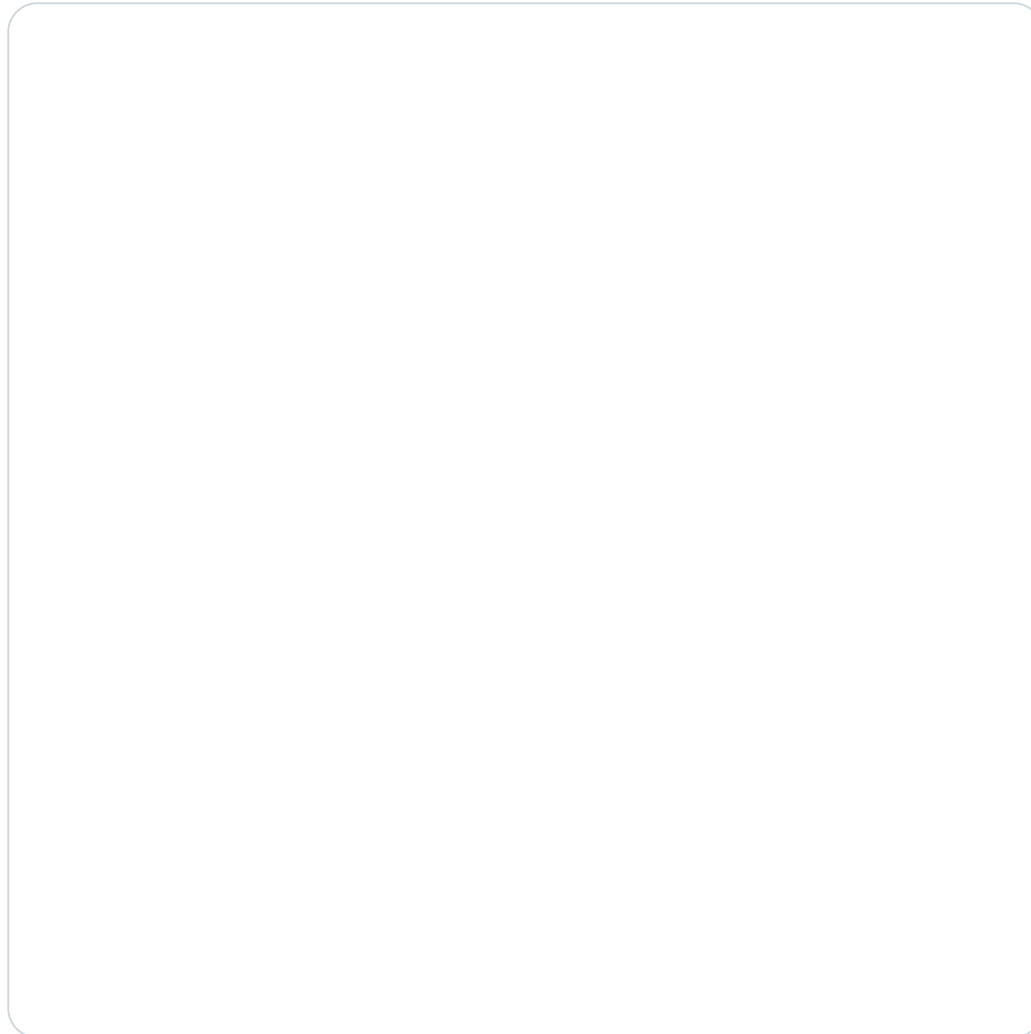
Multnomah County District Attorney Rod Underhill Saturday released informational graphics on social media to remind people to continue reporting suspected child abuse and neglect to the state’s hotline.



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The Multnomah County District Attorney's Office created several social media graphics that you can share about child abuse reporting during the COVID-19 pandemic. Click our link for view them all & share! mcd.a.us/wp-content/upl...
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“We all have an obligation to do everything we can to protect children and teens,” Underhill said in a statement.

Sunderland said the Department of Human Services is combing through its data and trying to identify any specific trends in hope of figuring out any preventative measures that can be taken.

The biggest thing people can do is try and keep in touch with neighbors, friends and acquaintances, and offer help when necessary, while keeping with social distancing measures in mind, Sunderland said. That could mean yelling across the front yard to your next door neighbor, or reaching out through text message, phone call or FaceTime.

“Check on your neighbors,” Sunderland said. “Check on the families that are around us, and when we can safely do so, provide whatever help we can.”

He said that could look like picking up groceries for a neighbor who can’t, or making sure people have information about applying for unemployment or food assistance benefits.

“Do what you can in whatever small way to help, and it will make a difference,” Sunderland said.

The child abuse hotline is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The number is 855-503-SAFE (855-503-7233).

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LOCAL NEWS

'We know things aren't OK': Oregon child abuse advocates worry about drop in calls amid pandemic

You can help by looking for signs of child abuse, like unexplained injuries, returning to earlier behaviors or fear of going home or being alone with someone.

Oregon child abuse advocates worry about drop in calls am...



Author: **Morgan Romero**

Published: **7:01 PM PDT April 9, 2020**

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PORTLAND, Oregon — Calls into Oregon's child abuse hotline are down significantly, and that's not necessarily a good thing.

An Oregon Department of Human Services spokeswoman says it's been "extremely concerning" to go from taking more than 700 calls a day to averaging fewer than 300 calls a day in the last few weeks.

During the first week of March, DHS had 4,600 calls from people concerned about child abuse, versus 2,000 the week of March 22.

This comes as calls to domestic violence hotlines, suicide prevention lifelines, cyber-bullying hotlines, and youth calls to the National Sexual Assault & Abuse Hotline are up dramatically.

RELATED: [Many Portland metro law enforcement agencies say domestic violence, disturbance calls are up](#)

But, in the case of child abuse and neglect, the numbers don't tell the full story.

Calls to the hotline have fallen off since the global COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent stay home order from Oregon Gov. Kate Brown. Meanwhile, Oregon children are out of school, with no activities to attend. For many, school is their safe space and home is not.

"Teachers, medical professionals, and many others are required by law to report suspected abuse and now that children have fewer eyes on them, there are not as many reports coming in. This doesn't mean abuse isn't happening, just that it's not being reported," the spokeswoman said in a statement to KGW.

'We know things aren't OK': Economic instability and stress are risk factors

[Prevent Child Abuse Oregon](#) is a statewide organization focused on upstream prevention of childhood abuse, with a mission to strengthen families.

PCAO advocates also say the drop in calls doesn't mean child abuse and neglect are happening any less. In fact, due to the current unprecedented situation and added stressors, abuse and neglect may in fact be happening more.

"We know things aren't OK. So the drop in the calls to the hotline is not a sign that kids are safer," Prevent Child Abuse Oregon Executive Director Pamela Heisler said. "They just aren't around their teachers, they're not going to extra-curriculars, they're not in childcare - some of those places where they maybe felt safe to disclose abuse that is happening, or a supportive adult could identify and say, 'It looks like something is wrong and I'm going to make that call.' All those things are off and kids are at home where they may not be safe."

RELATED: [Staying home isn't safe for all: Domestic violence amid COVID-19](#)

Children who self-report to the child abuse hotline tend to be older, Heisler said. But she added the majority of children who end up in foster care and in the child welfare system are under the age of five. Many of those children don't have access to technology to call anyone and report abuse at this time.

Children considered more at risk of ending up in the child welfare system often come from vulnerable families associated with risk factors such as mental illness, substance use disorders and interactions with law enforcement.

Given the current economic state we're in, with job lay-offs and financial uncertainties, the stressors that some at-risk, vulnerable families deal with daily are compounded and amplified. Some are now struggling to meet their families' basic needs.

We are living in stressful times, and DHS says economic instability is an "absolute risk factor" for abuse and neglect.

The supportive and protective services families lean on, whether they're dealing with addiction, domestic violence, or simply need community to help cope, can no longer provide in-person

support as we all maintain social distancing to slow the spread of coronavirus.

While a number of addiction recovery and mental health programs have shifted online, advocates say they may not be able to provide the same level of help.

"We know that parents are stressed right now and everyone has the right to be so extremely stressed. This is the biggest crisis we've faced as a country in our lifetimes" Heisler said. "But what we want to remind people is: It's not OK to take it out on your kids."

RELATED: [Oregon sets another record with 100,700 unemployment claims](#)

While so much is out of our control, something parents can control is how they care for themselves and how they protect their children.

PCAO advises if something sets you off as a parent, take a moment to yourself to breathe and calm down.

"Maybe go to the bathroom and lock the door and maybe take a self time-out ... buffer them from this trauma right now," Heisler said. "Because we know it's going to impact them for the rest of their lives and we don't want to see it be worse than it needs to be."

Lines for Life answers mental health questions



What you can do to prevent child abuse

Advocates say everyone can play a role in preventing child abuse. They're encouraging people to call and check in on family members and friends, particularly if they're at higher risk. Find out if they need anything, such as a meal or supply of diapers or wipes to help ease the stress.

"Make sure that physical distancing does not mean social isolation," the DHS spokeswoman said.

"I think right now everyone needs to feel like they're cared for, like someone is looking out for them, and that's parents too," Heisler added. "So we want to lift up this message of, 'It's really on all of us to keep kids safe right now, to keep ourselves from being at wits end with our kids, and also to support our friends, our neighbors, our colleagues, our faith partners - anyone we are involved with.' Just make that extra touch right now so they know they're not alone."

RELATED: [SafeOregon taking more calls about suicidal thoughts and cyberbullying during coronavirus pandemic](#)

It's important we understand that the responsibility of protecting Oregon children and supporting families before interactions with the child welfare system falls on all of us, she said.

"We are all on the front lines of reporting child abuse and neglect. We can't lean on mandatory reporters and school personnel and child care."

While it is not our job to decide whether child abuse or neglect is happening in a home, Heisler said it is all of our jobs to wave a flag and call attention to a family that might need help. At that point, Oregon Department of Human Services and Child Protective Services can do their jobs.

Oregon Child Abuse Solutions, the state entity supporting all of the state's children's advocacy centers, says solutions for child abuse do not lie solely in the hands of child welfare partners or often overwhelmed and underfunded nonprofit organizations.

The organization wants all Oregonians to be knowledgeable enough to identify the signs of abuse and brave enough to alert trained professionals so we can help keep kids safe.

Signs include unexplained injuries, returning to earlier behaviors, fear of going home or being alone with someone, changes in eating and sleeping habits, a drop in attendance or grades, and more.

MORE: [Signs of Child Abuse](#)

Executive Director Becky Jones says it's normal to wonder, "What if I'm wrong?" Instead, we should be asking, "What if I'm right?"

"It is absolutely true that one phone call can save a life and in cases where families just need help, one phone call can initiate services, safety, healing and hope," Jones said. "As we grapple with isolation and uncertainty, let's get educated about abuse and connect with one another in safe ways so that we can continue to build the connected, generous communities we all need."

COVID-19 impacting child abuse prevention organizations

The public health emergency has impacted the work prevention organizations around the state are doing. They can't conduct in-person home visits for now but have pivoted and are engaging virtually or over the phone, and delivering groceries and supplies to families.

"It's been really inspiring to watch the field respond to what people need," Heisler said.

PCAO launched a partnership with Healthy Families Oregon and Oregon Association of Relief Nurseries to help relieve some stress for families.

They started a [campaign called Parenting Through the Seasons](#) to get essential baby supplies donated to vulnerable families, such as diapers, wipes, and more. You can donate through Amazon Wish and local staff will deliver the items to families.

More than 20 children's advocacy centers across Oregon are still operating and providing services to children with urgent needs. However, Oregon Child Abuse Solutions says due to the stay home order and need to slow the spread of the virus, their child sexual abuse prevention training is put on hold.

Jones says child advocacy centers train 16,000 Oregonians in how to prevent child sexual abuse every year. About 1,300 Oregonians will miss out on trainings for every month the stay home order is in effect.

Resources

[Oregon Child Abuse Solutions launched a new website](#) designed to educate people staying home with time on their hands. It provides prevention tips and answers common questions about reporting abuse.

If you suspect a child is being abused or neglected, please call 1-855-503-SAFE (7233).

You can call the Oregon Child Abuse Hotline 24/7/365. You can also report child abuse by calling local law enforcement.

To report sexual abuse and seek help, please call the National Sexual Assault & Abuse Hotline Call 1-800-656-HOPE or [visit this website](#).

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