



## PREVENTING CHILD DEATHS DUE TO MALTREATMENT

Written testimony submitted by

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to

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On behalf of the 145,000 members of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), the world's largest professional association of social workers, I am pleased to submit written testimony for the hearing on "Child Deaths Due to Maltreatment" that was held by the Subcommittee on Human Resources of the House Ways and Means Committee on July 12, 2011. NASW advocates for sound social policies that support children, families and communities.

### **Social Work and the Protection of Children**

Since the founding of the social work profession over 100 years ago, enhancing the safety and well-being of children and families has been at its heart. Social workers can be found in a broad array of settings serving children and families including child welfare, mental health, health care, and schools, and in early childhood, juvenile justice and family support programs. All of these settings can play a critical role in children's safety and well-being. There is a long history of social work leadership in child welfare practice, research, training and policy. Social workers are invested in promoting policies and practices that will prevent child abuse and neglect and reduce the number of child abuse fatalities. Today more children may be at risk. There are concerns that the current economic climate is increasing family stress and causing cutbacks in education, mental health, and family support services (ECM, 2011; Sedlak, et al., 2010; Zagorsky, Schlesinger & Sege, 2010).

### **High Rates of Child Abuse Fatalities**

While many valuable programs focus on child abuse prevention and intervention, our societal response is insufficient to prevent the estimated 2500 children's deaths due to abuse and neglect that occur each year (Every Child Matters Education Fund [ECM], 2010). Although federal reports indicate that overall child abuse and neglect rates are decreasing, child abuse deaths are on the increase (U.S. HHS, 2009). The Government Accountability Office (GAO, 2011) found that the current data and tracking we have on deaths from child abuse and neglect is woefully inadequate and concurs with the National Coalition to End Child Abuse Deaths (NCECAD) that the number of deaths from child abuse and neglect are undercounted. The GAO recommends that there be greater federal investments in strengthening the quality of data as well as the information available on child abuse fatalities so that this increased knowledge can help prevent future deaths.

### **Identifying and Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect**

Many of the deaths due to child abuse and neglect that were profiled in *We Can Do Better* (ECM, 2010), a report about deaths from child abuse and neglect across the United States, prepared by the Every Child Matters Education Fund, were children who were not previously known to the child protective system. These deaths signal that as a society we need to do more to nurture and support both children and their caregivers and ensure that children are safe. Doctors, teachers, nurses, social workers, clergy, family members and neighbors all are stakeholders in protecting children. Slightly more than one half of child abuse and neglect reports are from professionals who come in contact with children suspected of being abused and neglected. The remaining reports are from friends, caregivers, coaches, neighbors and relatives (Children's Bureau, 2009). We do know, also, that many children at risk are never reported to the child protection system (Sedlak, et al., 2010).

Professionals who are legally mandated to report children who are suspected of being maltreated should have confidence that the child protection agency has the necessary resources to make an

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adequate and appropriate response, and that such reports will be assessed and heeded in a timely fashion. However, high workloads, inadequate staffing and lack of resources and training often result in systems that do not respond adequately to maltreatment reports.

### **Addressing Child Neglect**

It is important to note that child neglect is the most prevalent type of maltreatment (75% of maltreatment victims and 35 % of child fatalities [Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011]), yet we continue to have inadequate responses to what is frequently a chronic problem. The services offered to those who are maltreated and their families are usually episodic and crisis-oriented rather than focused on long term concerns (Blome & Steib, 2009). To appropriately address chronic neglect there is a need for targeted on-going services and supports as well as early intervention services for new parents. The provision for the early childhood evidence-based home visiting program included in the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act is one attempt to address this need for parents most at risk.

### **The Need for Skilled Social Workers in Child Protection Work**

Each day, child welfare professionals work diligently to support families in creating healthy and nurturing environments for children, but, too often, there are barriers to successful outcomes for children, youth and families. Whether it is social workers, nurses, physicians or lawyers involved in the child welfare system, a skilled and stable child welfare workforce is critical to providing effective services.

Of particular concern to NASW, is the involvement of professional social workers in child welfare agencies. Research by NASW and others shows that personal factors, like commitment to child welfare and education, especially a social work degree paired with specialized education in child welfare, are important factors for successful child welfare outcomes. Yet, nationally, less than 40% of child welfare workers have social work degrees and in many states it is less than 20% (Zlotnik, DePanfilis, Daining & Lane, 2005; Social Work Policy Institute, 2011). Agencies must also ensure that a supportive organizational culture and climate is in place to effectively support their child welfare workers. High quality supervision and peer support strengthen competent practice and prevent worker burn-out. Cross-agency collaboration and communication, on-going training and available resources for the children and families can help ensure that workers can do their jobs.

As one of society's First Responders, front-line child protective service workers are challenged by low salaries, limited access to necessary technology, safety risks, and high caseloads and workloads. Too often, large caseloads and unsupportive work environments lead to high turnover, hindering agencies' attainment of key safety and permanency outcomes for children. Ensuring a supportive work environment helps our child welfare workers do their job well and demonstrates that ultimately we care about the well-being of children and families. Not only do we have too many child abuse fatalities, but there are also safety risks for workers, and too many child welfare workers have died doing their jobs.

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## **Addressing Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Child Abuse and Neglect**

Across the country, child welfare workers are working with children from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Social workers play a critical role in ensuring that children and families of color receive quality services and that appropriate culturally responsive decisions are made to ensure their safety, well-being, and permanency. Nationally, and in most states, children of color, especially African American children, are overrepresented in the system, especially in foster care. We also see differential attention by the media and the public to child abuse deaths (Alexander, 2011). This disproportionality continues despite research indicating that there are no differences in the incidence of child abuse and neglect by racial or ethnic group. In addition, a large number of children involved with the child welfare system are immigrants from all corners of the world.

It is largely caseworkers and supervisors who make decisions regarding keeping children with their families, placement of children in foster care, reunification and other permanency outcomes for children. At each decision point, culturally appropriate action can profoundly influence the trajectory of a child's life. Making sure the child welfare workforce is culturally competent, and has the prerequisite knowledge and skills, is essential to maintaining the community's trust that the system is truly about the welfare of children and families rather than about enforcing discriminatory and unnecessary interventions.

## **Recommendations**

To prevent deaths from child abuse and neglect and to prevent and treat child abuse and neglect, NASW makes the following recommendations:

### **1. Standards and Better Data Collection are Needed on Child Abuse Fatalities**

NASW recommends that the Department of Health and Human Services standardize definitions and methodologies used to collect data related to maltreatment deaths and require states to provide such data. As highlighted in the recent report, *Child Maltreatment: Strengthening National Data on Child Fatalities Could Aid in Prevention* (GAO, 2011), there is a need for consistent data collection and standards for defining child abuse and neglect fatalities. In addition, state child death review teams should be adequately funded. Such data and reporting will assist the federal government and states to identify more effective strategies to prevent future deaths from maltreatment and to address racial disparities that might be occurring.

### **2. Education, Training and Workforce Standards Are Needed to Encourage Highly Skilled Professionals to Work in Programs that Promote the Safety and Well-Being of Children and Promote Family Self-Sufficiency and Family Stability**

NASW recommends that federal funding be enhanced to support the education and training of professional social workers to work in public and private child welfare agencies, including support for the education and training of supervisors. In addition, child protection agencies should increase their staffing standards, by requiring a minimum of a bachelor's degree in social work (BSW) for front-line workers and a master's degree in social work (MSW) and experience for supervisors in

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child protection programs. Resources should also be available to ensure that other professionals, including physicians, lawyers, and nurses, have the necessary training to recognize and assess child abuse and neglect and to ensure that there are high quality multi-disciplinary services available. In addition, all health and behavioral health, legal, and social service professional should have training related to child abuse and neglect assessment and prevention.

### **3. The Research Evidence to End Child Abuse Fatalities Should be Strengthened**

Additional research reviews and research studies are needed on topics such as:

- Reasons for under-reporting of child abuse and neglect.
- Exploring and addressing the reasons that mandated reporters do not always report suspected abuse or neglect.
- Increasing understanding of the specific service and information exchange issues that exist within agencies and across agencies that might result in fatalities and the strategies to ameliorate them.
- A comparative review of state policies (regarding reporting responsibilities and abuse and neglect definitions); funding methods (which federal, state and private funds support the programs for prevention and child protection services); and the variations in child abuse and neglect fatality data and how they are defined, gathered and reported. The outcome of this review will offer evidence on the potential linkages among these variables, and can identify factors that address the disparities in the number of reported child abuse deaths across states and potential prevention options.

### **4. A National Commission to End Child Abuse and Neglect Deaths Should be Created**

A national commission to end child abuse and neglect fatalities should be created by Congress to examine the best of current child protection strategies, to address the complexities of gathering accurate and complete data regarding child abuse and neglect deaths and to make recommendations regarding a multi-faceted national strategy for stopping maltreatment deaths.

The National Association of Social Workers stands ready to work with Congress to address this epidemic of child abuse and neglect deaths and to address the critical workforce issues facing child welfare agencies. The safety of our children and the well-being of the workers who every day work with our most at-risk children and families deserve no less.

If you have questions or would like additional information, please contact Joan Levy Zlotnik, PhD, ACSW, Director, Social Work Policy Institute, NASW Foundation at 202 336 8393 or [jzlotnik@naswdc.org](mailto:jzlotnik@naswdc.org).

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