



COMMENTS FOR THE RECORD

Submitted to the Subcommittee on Human Resources, Committee on Ways and Means

Hearing on Proposal to Reduce Child Deaths Due to Maltreatment

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Shadi Houshyar, Vice President for Child Welfare Policy
First Focus
1110 Vermont Avenue, NW Suite 900
Washington, DC 20005
Phone: (202) 657-0678
Email: shadih@firstfocus.net



Chairman Paulsen, Ranking Member Doggett and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to submit a statement for the record regarding the December 12 hearing on *“a proposal to reduce child abuse deaths due to maltreatment.”* We appreciate the attention that your Subcommittee is bringing to the weighty issue of child fatalities resulting from abuse and neglect and **urge you to ensure that in the course of your work, there is consideration of a broad array of effective prevention programs targeting child abuse and neglect.** Following on the heels of the July 2011 release of a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report entitled *“Strengthening National Data on Child Fatalities Could Aid in Prevention,”* and a subsequent hearing held by your Subcommittee that same month to review the data on child deaths resulting from maltreatment, this hearing is bringing much needed attention to a devastating societal problem.

The First Focus Campaign for Children is a bipartisan organization advocating for legislative change in Congress to ensure children and families are a priority in federal policy and budget decisions. Our organization is dedicated to the long-term goal of substantially reducing the number of children entering foster care, and working to ensure that our existing system of care protects children and adequately meets the needs of families in the child welfare system. We are especially concerned with increasing our federal investments in prevention efforts and providing supports and services for at-risk families to ensure that they never enter the child welfare system in the first place.

As you know, each year, child protective service agencies receive over 3 million reports of abuse, close to 1 million of which are substantiated – making child abuse a national epidemic. Admittedly, the consequences of child abuse and neglect are well-documented. Exposure to child abuse, specifically recurring experiences of abuse and neglect can have a significant, cumulative and long-term impact on a child’s development, often leading to deficits in interpersonal relationships, affect regulation, and self-development, as well as increased rates of multiple psychiatric diagnoses.

While not all abused children develop difficulties, many do experience a chronic course of psychopathology, with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and behavioral disorders commonly reported in victimized children and adults. Society also pays a heavy price for child abuse. In addition to the costs incurred by law enforcement, child protective services, judicial, health and other systems, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the lifetime financial cost for a single year of new confirmed cases of child abuse totals roughly \$124 billion.

The grim reality is that not all victims of child abuse and neglect survive. In 2011, according to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data Systems (NCANDS), there were 1,570 child deaths as a result of abuse and neglect - with 81 percent of those deaths accounted for by children younger than four years old. While significant, this number is likely an undercount given that most states report only child deaths from families known to child protection agencies. We know from available research that more than half of children who die from abuse are from families who were never known to or investigated by child protection agencies.

Research has demonstrated that no single factor, but rather a combination of individual, familial, and community risk factors increase the risk for maltreatment. Family level risk factors include caregiver stress,



depression, caregiver's own history of maltreatment, limited social supports, and the experience of stressful life events. Parental substance abuse is estimated to be a contributing factor in one-third to two-thirds of all maltreatment cases, and both neighborhood and familial poverty are two of the strongest predictors of abuse and neglect. In fact, caregivers in poverty are more likely to struggle with substance abuse and mental health problems, experience greater cumulative negative life events, and live in substandard housing, factors all associated with increased risk for abuse and neglect.

Major challenges remain. The continuing high level of child deaths is the clearest indication of continued need for improvement in our child protective system. In addition, while evidence on the effects of the recession is mixed, recent data points to noticeable spikes in child abuse following the recession. One study, "*Local Macroeconomic Trends and Hospital Admissions for Child Abuse, 2000 to 2009*," links a rise in physical child abuse in the last decade to local mortgage foreclosures. The study, published in the journal *Pediatrics*, is the largest examination to date of the impact the recession has had on child abuse. The study, found that every 1 percent increase in 90-day mortgage delinquencies over a one-year period was associated with a 3 percent increase in children's hospital admissions for physical child abuse, and a 5 percent increase in children's hospital admissions for traumatic brain injuries suspected to be caused by child abuse.

These data, in addition to the notably low number of families who receive any service - even when maltreatment is substantiated - suggest that we need to strengthen efforts to identify and provide services to families that are at high risk for child abuse and neglect. Currently, the federal government spends approximately 10 times more on foster care than on preventive services. This is due to limited federal and state funding and current federal restrictions in the allowable use of funds, and as a result, the larger portion of federal dollars going to foster care. One potential solution might be for states to directly access federal funds such as under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act (P.L. 74-271) for investments in a broad continuum of services for children and families including prevention, early intervention, and post-permanency services. Absent such a broad reform of the federal funding structure, we need solutions now.

The Protect Our Children Act of 2011 (H.R. 3653) establishes the Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities, tasked with conducting a thorough study on reducing fatalities from child abuse and neglect. The work of the Commission can lead to an increased understanding of deaths resulting from child abuse and can lead to improvements in agency systems and practices to protect children and prevent child abuse and neglect. **We urge you to ensure that in the course of the work of the Commission, there is consideration of a broad array of effective programs, including child health, mental health, juvenile justice and education services that are designed to prevent child abuse and neglect. In the process, it is also important to examine best practices in evaluating prevention programs for effectiveness. Furthermore, we urge you to ensure that the role of familial factors - including parental substance abuse, parental mental health and stress, domestic violence, and child care in precipitating child maltreatment and fatalities - and effective services designed to address these issues are considered.**

Proven prevention programs can yield considerable savings ranging from \$1.18 to \$14.65 for every dollar invested. Beyond the compelling financial argument, effective prevention measures can save lives. We owe it



to our children to continue to build on such efforts, and the Commission can do its part by ensuring that prevention is a key component of any recommendations it develops.

In closing, Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, the First Focus Campaign for Children stands prepared to work with you to ensure passage of H.R. 3653. We thank you for your leadership in addressing this critical issue, and protecting the health and welfare of our most vulnerable children. We look forward to working with you to ensure better care for our nation's foster children. If you have any additional questions, please contact me at (202) 657-0678.