

JOINT PRESS RELEASE by District Attorney Stephanie Vettenburg-Shaffer and Dept. of Human Services Director Daniel Wertz

Re: PANDEMIC CAUSES SPECIAL CONCERN FOR CHILDREN

Dated: April 16, 2020

April is Child Abuse Prevention Month. This April is unique given the current pandemic that caused the closing of schools and churches. Often times, child abuse is reported by people who see the child at these locations. But these safety nets have disappeared for many children because they are confined to their homes.

Law enforcement and Children and Youth Services continue to investigate reports of child abuse. We have a group of exceptional service providers such as the YWCA, CAC, and BRMC who continue to provide services to child victims.

The “Stay at Home” Order is expected to “flatten the curve” but it requires us to call on the community to be vigilant about child abuse.

Anyone can report child abuse. And we are asking all people who have contact with children to pay attention and report any suspicions about abuse. Certain professionals are classified as “mandated reporters” under the law, meaning that people who come into contact with children, such as teachers, are required to report suspicions of child abuse to the state child abuse hotline called Childline. Of course, mandated reporters still report any such suspicions as required. But, more than ever, we are calling on everyone who sees a child to be aware that you may be the only outside adult that sees that child for weeks at a time. Abuse could remain hidden if people do not act on their suspicions. It is so important that each one of us pays extra attention to every child we may see. Everyone’s travel is limited and so are the people that may see a child outside of your own family. Teachers and ministers may see them over video only rather than in person. And they are trained to identify signs of abuse and will report it as mandated reporters. But the people who may see a child in person and who will be in a position to identify abuse are now likely to be other people – it could be a mail carrier, store cashier, and restaurant delivery driver. These are the people that are now on the forefront of our fight against child abuse.

Mandated reporters are required to call Childline at 1-800-932-0313.

If you see something that does not feel right to you, please report it to 911 or Childline at the number above.

If you know of a child who you believe is at high risk for abuse – factors that can lead to that would include domestic violence in the home, alcohol or drug abuse, or past incidents of violence- please come up with a plan to check on that child. At a minimum, place a phone call or video chat.

The internet continues to open up our small county to the world and, with it, brings the possibility that our children are susceptible to online predators. Children are required to use computers and smart phones more during this pandemic than usual. Parents are urged to set rules for internet use- such as requiring internet use to occur only in a

common area of the house rather than the child's bedroom and only when a parent is present.

Potential on-line predators also know that children are home. And law enforcement remains vigilant in pursuing online exploitation. They continue to investigate reports of child pornography and exploitation from online predators.

All of us are facing unique, unplanned challenges associated with this crisis. There continues to be network of professionals and community partners that are available to assist individuals with dealing with those stressors- some of which may contribute to child abuse. Three areas to find local resources are:

On Facebook: McKean County Collaborative Board page;

County website: mckeancountypa.org (Covid-19 link to find "Community Resources"); and

For additional resources, dial 211 or text your zip code to 898-211 or go to <https://pa211nw.org/>.

Everyone knows that the current pandemic has created a life we have never seen before. This is also true for child abuse prevention efforts. Predators should know that the community has its eyes open, parents are vigilant and law enforcement, Children and Youth Services and service providers are relentless in their efforts.

If you suspect abuse, please call 1-800-932-0313 or 911.