

Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse & Neglect Fatalities Issues Final Report

After two years of meetings, research and deliberations, the federal [Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse & Neglect Fatalities](#) issued their final report and recommendations on March 17th. The 168-page report, entitled "[Within Our Reach: A National Strategy to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities](#)," presents recommendations for actions that the Commission believes will be effective in ending these deaths as the result of child abuse and neglect.

The Commission was established by the Protect Our Kids Act of 2012 and charged with developing a national strategy for reducing child fatalities resulting from abuse and neglect. Beginning in 2014, twelve Commissioners, appointed by the President and Congress, began a two-year process of holding public hearings in 11 jurisdictions across the country.

The Alliance was pleased to have offered input to the Commission during their deliberations, including meetings with CECANF staff; discussions with Commissioners Susan Dreyfus, Cassie Bevan and former Rep. Bud Cramer; testimony from two CTF directors, Mike Foley (Michigan) and Kendra Dunn (Colorado); and testimony from two parent representatives of the Alliance.

The Alliance also submitted written testimony and recommendations to the Commission and provided input for the National Child Abuse Coalition's written testimony to the Commission.

In their final report, the Commission recommended a combination of immediate actions aimed at protecting children who are currently at risk, as well as broader changes to transform and to utilize public health approaches to create a "new child welfare system for the 21st century."

Immediate actions recommended by the Commission include:

- States should undertake a retrospective review of child abuse and neglect fatalities from the previous five years to identify family and systemic circumstances that led to fatalities. Congress and the administration have significant roles in the implementation and oversight of this recommendation.
- Every state should review their policies on screening reports of abuse and neglect to ensure that the children most at risk for fatality—those under age 3—receive the appropriate response, and they and their families are prioritized for services, with heightened urgency for those under the age of 1.
- The administration should lead an initiative to support the sharing of real-time information among key partners such as CPS and law enforcement.
- State receipt of funding from the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) should be contingent on existing child death review teams also reviewing life-threatening injuries caused by child maltreatment.

- All other programs—such as Medicaid and home visiting programs—should be held accountable for ensuring their services are focused on reducing abuse and neglect fatalities.
- Federal legislation should include a minimum standard designating which professionals should be mandatory reporters of abuse or neglect, and these professionals should receive quality training.

In addition the Commission recommended the following long-term actions:

- Elevating the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Children's Bureau to report directly to the Secretary of HHS.
- Using information from their review of fatalities, every state should be required to develop and implement a comprehensive state plan to prevent child abuse and neglect fatalities.
- Conducting joint Congressional hearings on child safety, provide financial resources to support states, and encourage innovation to reduce fatalities.
- Providing flexibility in child welfare funding. This recommendation included the Commission's support for the Hatch-Wyden Family First legislation.

While all Commissioners agreed that funding is needed to support efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect fatalities, they were unable to reach consensus on the amount of funds to be provided and whether there should be new funds invested or a redirection of current funds. There were four different views offered on funding in the report. One group of Commissioners advocated for a \$1 billion increase in CAPTA; however, it was stated more as a "down payment" to ensure CPS agencies keep children protected and to support efforts in the first year to review cases of children known to CPS.

As the Commission concluded its work, there was a lack of consensus by members on the funding issue as well as a number of others. Ultimately, ten Commissioners voted in favor of the Final Report and two Commissioners (Cassie Statuto Bevan, Ed.D., and the Honorable Patricia M. Martin) voted No.

Commissioner Bevan's objections are outlined in a Minority Report, which is included as Appendix K in the Commission Report. Commissioner Martin has published her own Dissenting Report detailing her objections, which is available at <http://nccpr.org/reports/JudgeMartinDissent.pdf>.

We are pleased that the Commission has highlighted the importance of effective prevention programs such as early childhood home visitation, and a need to broaden responsibility for prevention beyond traditional child protection systems in their recommendations. There are other aspects of the recommendations that fall outside the scope of work that Children's Trust and Prevention Funds (CTFs) typically address, but we are hopeful that CTFs will be included as key partners in the planning processes that the Commission recommends each state undertake to address the prevention of child

abuse and neglect fatalities. (In our recommendations to the Commission, we also recommended that parents be included in these planning processes.)

While it is somewhat disappointing that the Commission did not reach consensus on their final recommendations, an issue as complex as the prevention of child abuse and neglect fatalities brings forth many different ideas and strategies. There are no clear-cut or easy solutions. The fact that there are disagreements in the final report is not necessarily an indicator that the Commission's recommendations will not be given strong consideration. On the contrary, it is worthwhile to have a dialogue that balances the need to address structural changes in how we approach child welfare in this country, as well as the need to utilize resources effectively and invest them where they have the greatest impact. We know that Congressional leaders and their staff are reviewing the report carefully, and it is likely to be a factor as CAPTA reauthorization and the Hatch-Wyden Family First legislation are up for consideration this year.

As the Commission released its report last week, the Alliance offered the following statement expressing our appreciation for the work that they have completed.

"We applaud the important work of the Commission in identifying strategies, approaches and policies to support children and families so that every child in our nation can thrive," commented Teresa Rafael, Executive Director of the National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds. "We commend the Commission on their dedicated approach in reviewing what is working in communities across the country and carefully considering their recommendations and issuing their call to action in protecting our nation's children. It is particularly noteworthy that during its review and deliberations, the Commission sought the advice of parent advocates and highlighted their testimony and recommendations. We are pleased that the Commission has recommended the need to transform our child welfare systems for the 21st century to incorporate a public health approach that works beyond traditional child protection systems to a broader cross systems approach. Supporting children and families and the work of eliminating child abuse and neglect fatalities will require collective action from community leaders, parents, public and private partners and policy makers. The Alliance is eager to work with lawmakers and others to support this important work of advancing our shared goal of eliminating child fatalities and helping every child in America have the great childhoods they deserve."