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Preventing Child Abuse Fatalities – Support the Life-Saving Work of Child Protective Services

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Not a day goes by the media doesn't cover a case of a child who was horribly abused or neglected. It's estimated that between 1,500 and 3,000 children in the U.S. will die this year at the hands of those who were supposed to protect them. So vulnerable, the majority are under the age of four, they die from abuse due to beatings, they die from neglect, which includes starvation, inadequate medical care, unsafe sleeping or from accidents after being left alone. According to the 2016 report by the Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities, many babies die from abuse or neglect without ever being reported to Child Protective Services (CPS). If CPS doesn't know about them, caseworkers cannot protect them.

My hope is that each of these tragic stories serves as a call to action for everyone to learn the signs of child abuse and neglect and how to make a report if they believe a child is at risk. It's everyone's responsibility to keep children safe. This must be a public/private partnership, a shared responsibility to keep children safe.

Working in the child protection field is very rewarding. It can also be demanding, difficult and draining. As the leader of the first child protection agency in the world, The New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, I want to acknowledge all the professionals who work for Child Protective Services throughout the United States.

To put the scope of their work into context, these statistics might be helpful. In 2014, 3.6 million referrals alleging maltreatment were made across the United States to local state Child Protective Services involving 6.6 million children. Approximately 3.2 million children received an investigation. Of those investigated, 702,000 were determined to be victims of child abuse and neglect. There were 1,580 tragic child fatalities recorded too.

Unfortunately, these numbers, although alarmingly large, are not the full picture of the problem. Not all states report abuse and neglect the same way, and not all child abuse fatalities are named as such. The

death of a toddler who drowns in a pool may be classified as an accident in one area and as child neglect in another. There are also certain territories that don't report statistics in any systematic way. We also know that many cases of child abuse and neglect go unreported or undetected.

Responding to the cases that are reported, Child Protective Service workers have non-stop demands. The investigations can be very complicated, time-sensitive, anxiety provoking and at times downright dangerous. One worker told me that a mother's boyfriend punched her and threatened to kill her when she went to remove a child. She had to return with the police. She also lived in that neighborhood and feared retaliation for doing her job. I know of cases whereby staff have been attacked by dogs in the household they were visiting, shot at by family members, pushed down flights of stairs, threatened with knives and stalked. They are doing their work with the vision and mission to protect children. The perils of their job rarely make the news, but it comes with the territory and often, they need to go back to these homes and neighborhoods to complete their work. I'm sure there are days when they must feel like they've had enough, but thankfully, most hang in there.

The stress level that Child Protective Service workers endure is daunting. They are constantly dealing with trauma that I characterize as "man's inhumanity to man." Research shows that these types of violence and trauma have the potential to also produce the highest level of Post-Traumatic Stress Symptoms in the victim. This victimization has a "ripple effect," spreading out to all those who are involved with the child. The impact of exposure to others' pain and suffering must be acknowledged. Staff may experience Secondary Traumatic Stress symptoms too. For those of us involved in child protection; we probably understood in general the personal fortitude needed and risks involved when we signed on. But, more often than not, we didn't realize how deeply we could be impacted by bearing constant witness to the intense suffering of children. It takes a very strong and determined professional to do this work day in day out.

I have also had the privilege of hearing many of the "prideful moments" of child protective staff throughout this county. Children being reunited with their parents after a removal for neglect, a mother finally entering a substance abuse program, a letter written by a grateful grandmother following the kinship placement of her grandson, a failure-to-thrive baby reach developmental milestones, an adolescent showing up at a CPS office to say "thank you" to the worker for "being there" are just a few examples.

One final point I'd like to make is that the public tends to hold Child Protective staff accountable when child abuse and neglect occurs. It's important to realize that the parents of children who are abused and neglected are often struggling themselves. Risk factors include mental illness, unemployment, domestic violence, substance abuse, crime-ridden neighborhoods, poverty and substandard housing - this certainly doesn't excuse harming children, but it also clarifies why no single government agency or Child Protective staff member acting alone can address all of these issues. Everyone must be involved in protecting children. These concerns are echoed in the recently released 2016 Final Report of the Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities.

So, let's salute the workers who do this heroic job, day in and day out. And, let's all make a pledge to get involved too. Learn the signs and symptoms of child abuse and neglect and how to make a report. You may save a child's life.

For more information on keeping children safe visit www.nyspcc.org.