

Child abuse cases rise 14% in county

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Child abuse is on the rise in Person County, if statistics from the past year are any indication.

The number of child abuse cases in Person County increased by 14 percent in fiscal year 2003-04. At the same time, child abuse cases in North Carolina declined by nine percent. And while there are several good programs in place to help educate families and prevent child abuse, more are needed, officials agree.

Person County Department of Social Services Director Beverly Warren credits several factors for the increase in child abuse cases here. While community programs are helping many families, she said, they are not reaching all who need to be reached.

“Our increase in reports and investigations from one year to the next is significant and is probably attributable to several factors rather than just one glaring change,” Warren said. “First, the state implemented a structured tool which meant that anyone calling in a report anywhere was asked basically the same questions. The interview takes considerably longer but also helps us to make better screening decisions. We were glad to see in Person County that the longer interview had not been a discouragement to people who needed to call in,” Warren said.

“As to why the increases,” she continued, “social changes, such as more mobile residents who don't have extended family to call on in stressful times is a factor. Many times people come and go from households in a less structured way that can stress all family members.

“Children and their parents are trying to navigate their way through a much more complex world than past generations dealt with,” said Warren, and “there are more frequent problems with substance abuse; a shortage of affordable housing; safety net programs for families in trouble are shrinking; the economy has been a significant factor as people have lost jobs, been on short hours, not been able to find jobs, lacked job skills for the new jobs available, and generally lost stability for their families.”

Warren said her figures reflect what DSS here actually reported to the state.

“In 2003 we took 467 reports and in 2004 we took 541 reports,” she explained.

Those figures reflect a 14 percent increase. In 2003, she said, DSS accepted 351 of the reports for investigation, “which means the allegations made in the reports fell within the legal definitions of abuse, neglect, or dependency. Therefore we investigated 75 percent of the reports we received.”

In 2004, said Warren, “We received 541 reports of which we accepted 424 for investigation. Therefore, we investigated 78 percent of reports.”

While reported cases were up by 14 percent from the previous year, the number of cases accepted for investigation represented an increase of 20 percent in 2004.

“In 2003 we actually found abuse, neglect, or dependency in 31 percent of the cases investigated,” said Warren. “That is very close to the state average for all counties. Due to cases needing medical or psychological assessments for several months, the 2004 figures are not complete.”

The state also saw an increase five percent in the number of cases investigated. In fiscal 2003-04, 113,557 children in North Carolina were assessed for child abuse and neglect, an increase of 6,400 from 2002-03. Of those cases, 27,310 children were found to be abused or neglected compared to 30,016 the year before, a decrease of nine percent, according to the state Department of Health and Human Services report released Jan. 19.

The statistics include a new measure: “Children in need of services.” They are being identified through the new Multiple Response System (MRS), which gives social workers a friendlier, less adversarial way to interact with families.

A finding of in “need of service” means that, while there are safety issues, social workers can immediately start engaging the families in identifying their strengths that can be enhanced to ensure the safety of the child. This approach focuses on a real partnership with parents to ensure the safety of their children. MRS was expanded from 10 to 52 counties during the 2003-04 state fiscal year.

Warren said she hoped that better reporting was partly responsible for Person County’s higher numbers.

“There have been public information campaigns to help people know that they can contact us if they know of a potential child protective services situation,” she said.

“The number of reports we get and the number of cases we investigate and subsequently substantiate grows insidiously every year,” said Warren. “The growth is 15 percent or 20 percent, but it is a constant pattern. Thus far, over recent history there has been no instance of turning that number around. As our population grows, so will our opportunities, but so will our social problems.

“That is why we are so hopeful for the Multiple Response System,” Warren said. “The numbers will change as we handle cases a little differently. All cases that we decide to work with will not be referred to as ‘accepted for investigation.’ We will see the need for services, both treatment and prevention services, and we will go to work immediately to help the family solve their problem rather than work entirely through a more forensic style investigation. Those cases will be referred to in our reporting as ‘identified in need of services.’ Hopefully,” said Warren, “this approach will lead to quicker, more positive outcomes for those families.”