

CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION MONTH FOLLOWS 'INCREASE IN CHILD ABUSE CASES' IN ALACHUA COUNTY

By Natalie Cabral

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This April's Child Abuse Prevention Month has perhaps never been more needed. According to a Gainesville advocacy center, the pandemic caused an increase in child abuse while limiting the ability for it to be recognized and reported.

At the Child Advocacy Center in Gainesville, professionals work together to coordinate investigations and interventions for child abuse cases. Their goal is to provide a safe and supportive environment for neglected and abused children.

According to the center's website, in 2020 they helped 3,235 people affected by child abuse, including 1,895 child victims. Of this group of children, 55 were victims of human trafficking and 15 were victims of child pornography.

Human trafficking is a larger issue in Alachua County than residents might think.

Sabrina Harris, development director at the Child Advocacy Center, said that because of the massive gamedays at the University of Florida and many people coming into the city, traffickers can fall under the radar. Gainesville's proximity to the highway only makes it easier for traffickers to have success in the city.

"It's more prevalent than people may realize," Harris said.

But one of the biggest impacts on child abuse has been the coronavirus pandemic. Abuse often occurs when there are mounting pressures and financial stress in the home.

Harris said during the pandemic, there has been an increase in child abuse cases because these children are being trapped in tension-filled homes.

Moreover, the inability to go to school makes some of these child abuse cases undetectable.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in 2018, over 60% of reports alleging child abuse and neglect came from professionals — police officers, teachers, lawyers and social services staff. Of those reports, over one in five came from education personal.

Remote learning effectively cut off the best chance a child has of their abuse being recognized and reported.

“An abuser is not going to report themselves,” Harris said.

The Child Advocacy Center works in tandem with an emergency pediatrician at Shands Hospital, and they treat children who have been abused. According to Harris, the child abuse cases seen at the hospital during the pandemic have been far worse than anything they have ever seen.

Harris said that the things people did to those children were “unimaginable.”

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that the pandemic may also have interfered with children getting healthcare treatment for injuries resulting from abuse; child abuse-related emergency department visits decreased, but the percentage of such visits resulting in hospitalization increased, compared with 2019.

This is not a distant issue – it’s occurring in our backyard. Harris said that child abuse affects roughly 10% of children in Alachua County, with over 5,000 cases reported annually. And those are only the reported cases.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in 2019, there were 1,840 child fatalities due to abuse and neglect. Additionally, they estimated in 2018 that the victim rate for child maltreatment is more than 9 victims per 1,000 children in the population.

This month, the Alachua County Library District partnered with Partnership for Strong Families to put a pinwheel display outside select locations to highlight Child Abuse Prevention Month.

*The pinwheels were chosen as a symbol of childhood fun and innocence for Child Abuse Prevention Month.
(Natalie Cabral/WUFT News)*

Pinwheels were chosen as a symbol because they represent the innocent fun often associated with children.

"It translates really well into the message that we are trying to send in Child Abuse Prevention Month," said Jacob Clore, the community engagement specialist at Partnership for Strong Families.

The goal of these displays is to increase community awareness and involvement. Clore hopes that when people see the pinwheels and notice the signs, they will want to learn more about what they can do to protect these children and families.

"When it comes down to it, this kind of initiative is really geared towards raising community awareness and showing the community that it really is a community effort to protect abused children," Clore said.

The Alachua County Library District partners with hundreds of organizations in the community to increase involvement and awareness.

"The library is the heart of the community," said Rachel Cook, the library district's public relations and marketing manager. "So, it is important for us to be connected with our community partners and provide support to the things that matter to our community."

The pinwheel displays are not only advocating for Child Abuse Prevention Month, but also for a strong and healthy childhood for all children. Partnership for Strong Families emphasizes the importance of having suitable foster care homes for neglected children.

In Alachua County, there are 292 children in out-of-home care and approximately 55 foster homes, according to Clore.

"We want to make sure that when children are removed from their home that they are being placed in a home that has some degree of familiarity for them," Clore said.

Both the Child Advocacy Center and Partnership for Strong families participated in the Amazing Give, which allows them to acquire donations to support their efforts.

Harris said that without donations they could not offer the services they do. These services include therapy for neglected children, financial services to parents and informational presentations provided to the community.

Partnership for Strong Families participated in the Amazing Give to help them fundraise for extracurricular resources and activities for foster care.

"Every Florida citizen is responsible," Harris said. "If they suspect any child abuse, they are responsible to report it."