

LETTER TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

To the Governor, members of the Iowa General Assembly, and the Legislative Services Agency:

Prevent Child Abuse Iowa convened and staffed a task force on the prevention of sexual abuse of children, pursuant to Section 87 of Senate File 533, which was signed into law on July 27, 2011. As provided in the legislation, this task force consisted of four ex-officio members of the general assembly; appointees of the directors of the departments of education, public health, and human services; a designee of the state court administrator; representatives of the Iowa County Attorneys Association and the chief juvenile court administrators; representatives of the Iowa State Education Association, Iowa Association of School Boards, and School Administrators of Iowa; and representatives of the Iowa Psychological Association, Iowa Coalition Against Sexual Assault, Prevent Child Abuse Iowa, and Iowa's accredited child protection centers.

The task force conducted its first meeting on September 29, 2011 and met subsequently on October 31 and December 6. At the task force's final meeting on January 4, 2012, the committee approved this report, which is hereby submitted, along with a model school district policy addressing the sexual abuse prevention of children. This report summarizes the charge from the general assembly, describes the work of the task force, provides an overview of child sexual abuse and its prevention, lists the policy goals to prevent child sexual abuse, and makes recommendations for legislative action.

The task force appreciates the opportunity offered by the general assembly to serve on Iowa's first task force focusing on the prevention of child sexual abuse.

SUMMARY OF THE CHARGE FROM SF 533

Section 87 of SF 533 gave the task force on preventing child sexual abuse three main responsibilities:

1. To develop a model policy addressing sexual abuse of children, for adoption by school districts
2. To create goals for state policy that would prevent child sexual abuse
3. To make recommendations for statutory changes and/or methods to foster cooperation among state agencies and between state and local governments and school districts

SUMMARY OF TASK FORCE ACTIVITIES

Task force members gathered information at its four meetings concerning child sexual abuse in Iowa. Members received prepared testimony from representatives of the Iowa DHS, the Iowa Sex Offender Research Council, a panel of school counselors, Prevent Child Abuse Iowa, and the former chair of the Abuse Education Review Panel. Task force members also heard testimony from survivors of child sexual abuse; health, education, and DHS staff; counseling and treatment professionals; and abuse prevention educators. The task force further benefited from a subcommittee's work on developing the model school policy addressing child sexual abuse.

The task force focused its work in these two areas:

1. Creation of a model policy addressing sexual abuse of children. The task force recognized the critical role schools can play in addressing child sexual abuse by:

- Educating children, parents, and educators about child sexual abuse
- Providing information and education on how to stop abuse before it starts, increase protective factors and reduce risk factors
- Respond effectively to possible threats of sexual abuse
- Intervening when sexual abuse may have occurred
- Ensuring support for sexually abused students

The task force and education subcommittee examined sexual abuse prevention education options; awareness resources for parents, school personnel, and others; methods for educating parents and professionals about the warning signs of abuse and how to respond; and options for counseling, treatment, and support services.

At its December 6 and January 4 meetings, the task force reviewed and approved a model policy, which is included with this report. Critical to the model policy's success will be creation of a web-based resource page, with links to supporting resources and instructional materials. Yet to be determined is who would host and maintain this web source and what financial resources would support it.

2. Goals and recommendations for preventing child sexual abuse. The task force spent most of its time examining areas for improving Iowa's efforts to prevent child sexual abuse. Here are the major areas included in its review:

- Current child sexual abuse prevention efforts and possible new strategies
- How to improve the ability of all adults to protect children from sexual abuse and respond effectively when it may have occurred
- Opportunities for expanding overall community knowledge about child sexual abuse and its prevention
- The need for youth-serving organizations to have effective sexual abuse prevention policies
- The difficulties children and youth, particularly males, face in disclosing abuse and/or barriers to sexually abused children receiving support and treatment
- The critical role of Iowa's mandatory reporters in protecting children from sexual abuse and the need to improve their capability to discharge their responsibilities
- Whether to include other professionals, such as clergy, on the list of mandatory reporters
- Whether to require that all adults be mandated to report suspected child abuse
- The role of school counselors, nurses, and other professionals in child sexual abuse prevention
- Possible changes in the handling of allegations of sexual abuse by education professionals
- The importance of having a school climate that reduces the risk of sexual abuse
- Advancements in the treatment of juvenile sex offenders

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE AND ITS PREVENTION

The committee heard testimony and reviewed data and reports on child sexual abuse in Iowa. Most of the available abuse data comes from Department of Human Services (DHS) reports on founded cases involving sexual abuse of a child by a parent or other person responsible for a child (commonly called a “caretaker.”) There is some data on criminal prosecutions or juvenile court proceedings involving sexual abuse of children by caregivers or others, but comparisons over time are difficult to make. As a result, the task force primarily examined child protection services data for examination of trends in child sexual abuse.

According to DHS data, the number of founded cases of child sexual abuse has declined by sixty percent over the last two decades – from 1,471 instances in 1991 and 1,483 in 1993 to 636 instances in 2008 and 637 in 2010. In the early 1990s, founded sexual abuse cases represented 16 to 18 percent of all abuse; in 2007-10, sexual abuse was four percent or lower. Other national reports and studies show a similar decline in sexual abuse across the country over the same time.

Leading national experts, including those at the respected Crimes Against Children Research Center, maintain that these surveys and reports indicate a real drop in child sexual abuse and not a change in reporting or agency actions. The extent of any decline is uncertain, however, because of the overall unreliability of child sexual abuse numbers in two areas. First, as surveys and studies indicate, child sexual abuse is significantly underreported by its victims and others. Second, even when reported, confirming that sexual abuse occurred is challenging.

Another way to estimate the extent of child sexual abuse is through population-based surveys. While population surveys in Iowa do not routinely include sexual violence, a 2001 survey (the most recent one available) estimated one in ten Iowans had experienced sexual violence. Of those, 67 percent were first assaulted/abused before the age of 18 and the vast majority (73 percent) of perpetrators was known to the victim.

The committee heard about past and current efforts to prevent the sexual abuse of children. For more than three decades, teaching children important prevention concepts has been a key component of child sexual abuse prevention. This child-focused instruction, usually presented in schools, attempts to reach children before sexual abuse occurs and to encourage them to tell an adult if there has been sexual abuse. Children learn risk reduction and prevention concepts including body boundaries, their right to say “no” to inappropriate touches, how to recognize and respond to perpetrator tricks, and the importance of telling and getting help from an adult if they might be abused. Children also learn empathy and communication skills and how to respond to peer-to-peer acts of bullying, sexual harassment and assault, and gender-based violence.

Children should not, however, be expected to bear the responsibility for keeping themselves safe from sexual abuse. Recognizing this, Iowa prevention efforts have recently expanded to teaching parents, other caregivers, and adults about their responsibility to keep children safe. This instruction occurs in group parent education settings, home-visiting programs, and public awareness activities. A curriculum used in Iowa and elsewhere, called *Nurturing Healthy Sexual Development*, helps participants better understand the scope of sexual abuse, healthy sexual development of children, and ways to respond to children’s sexual behaviors and questions. Unfortunately, resources for providing this instruction widely in Iowa are lacking.

Experts have also highlighted the need to address prevention among community members, youth-serving professionals, and concerned adults because child sexual abuse happens in organizations, churches, schools, and other locations outside the home. Prevention education can help professionals recognize the warning signs of sexual abuse, develop child safety policies, and identify other actions they can take to prevent child sexual abuse. An example of a program providing this information is *Stewards of Children*, developed by a national child sexual abuse prevention organization called Darkness to Light. *Stewards of Children* is an evidence-based sexual abuse prevention program for adults but is not widely available in Iowa.

STATE GOALS FOR PREVENTING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

The task force recognized the value of current child sexual abuse prevention efforts and the importance of continuing and enhancing these efforts. These prevention efforts include changing policies of educational, religious, sports, and youth-serving organizations to have safeguards that reduce the risk of perpetration by staff or volunteers. The task force identified the critical importance of Iowa's mandatory reporters to preventing child sexual abuse and the need to improve their training.

The task force recognized the need to take additional steps to enhance the ability of parents, school personnel, and other community members to recognize and respond effectively to the risks of child sexual abuse. The task force acknowledged the value of preventing further sexual abuse by providing treatment for juveniles who have sexually offended against children and offering school-based instruction for youth to reduce sexual victimization and perpetration.

Following is a summary of the state goals adopted by the task force:

1. Increase adult awareness of child sexual abuse, its precursors and warning signs, ways to protect children from it, and how to report its occurrence by:
 - a. Expanding educational programs for parents on child sexual abuse and its prevention
 - b. Offering trainings for parents, educators, health and human services professionals, staff of youth-serving organizations, and community members about behaviors and policies that prevent child sexual abuse
 - c. Making available to parents of schoolchildren educational resources on the warning signs of abuse, ways to protect their children from victimization, and advice on how to respond if abuse occurs
 - d. Conducting public education campaigns on the prevention of child sexual abuse
2. Teach children and youth important skills to reduce the risk of sexual victimization and perpetration and provide resources to increase protective factors by:
 - a. Increasing the provision of prevention instruction that meets best practice standards
 - b. Encouraging schools to offer age-appropriate instructional materials on sexual abuse for schoolchildren
3. Expand the knowledge, capability, and responsiveness of mandatory reporters of child abuse by:
 - a. Increasing the frequency of required mandatory reporter training

- b. Requiring that reporters receive in-person training from knowledgeable professionals
 - c. Ensuring that the training mandatory reporters receive provides sufficient content to fully inform them about abuse, its warning signs, and how to report it
 - d. Offering profession-specific information where appropriate
4. Improve the responsiveness of school staff and administrators to child sexual abuse or the risk of it by:
 - a. Providing training for school personnel on the indicators of child sexual abuse and how to respond
 - b. Offering culturally relevant resources and support for a student and family to ensure educational success for a child who has suffered sexual abuse
 5. Support the reporting of suspected child sexual abuse by prohibiting retaliatory action against employees (including non-mandatory reporters) who have made a good faith report of child abuse
 6. Reduce the likelihood of child sexual abuse by ensuring adequate and effective treatment for juveniles who have committed sexual offenses against children
 7. Provide clarity about the involvement of law enforcement in non-caretaker sexual abuse cases when reports are made to DHS or education officials

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LEGISLATIVE ACTION

1. Amend Iowa's mandatory reporter law to address the need for more frequent, informative, profession-specific, and effective training for mandatory reporters
2. Add clergy to the list of professionals who are mandatory reporters – while acknowledging the issue of the confidentiality of penitential communications
3. Enact legislation to prevent employers from retaliatory action against employees who in good faith report suspected child abuse
4. Provide funding to support education to enhance public understanding of child sexual abuse, its precursors and warnings, ways to protect children from it, and how to report and respond to its occurrence.
5. Increase funding for Iowa's current child sexual abuse prevention programs
6. Increase funding for the treatment of juveniles who have committed sexual offenses against children.
7. Ensure resources to assist in developing and maintaining a single web-based platform for providing state-of-the-art information about child sexual abuse to all Iowa citizens

CONCLUSIONS

Task force members fully support the need to achieve these goals and take the recommended action in order to prevent child sexual abuse. Task force members respectfully submit this report and welcome the advice and support of the Governor and general assembly in addressing the identified needs and opportunities.

TASK FORCE MEMBERS

Here are the task force members and the organizations they represented:

Barb Anderson, Iowa Department of Education
Gail Barber, State Court Administrator
Elizabeth Barnhill, Iowa Coalition Against Sexual Assault
Lisa Bender, Iowa Department of Human Services
Nancy Boettger, Iowa Senate (ex-officio)
Matt Carver, School Administrators of Iowa
Mary Gannon, Iowa Association of School Boards
Julian Garrett, Iowa House (ex-officio)
Chris Hall, Iowa House (ex-officio)
Scott Hobart, Chief Juvenile Court Officers
Rob Hogg, Iowa Senate (ex-officio)
Nan Horvat, Iowa County Attorneys Association
Binnie LeHew, Iowa Department of Public Health
Lynn Lutze, Iowa Psychological Association
Barb Ramos, Prevent Child Abuse Iowa
Nancy Scheumann, Iowa's accredited child protection centers
Steve Scott, Prevent Child Abuse Iowa
Virginia Traxler, Iowa State Education Association