

Ending Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities: Recommendations of the CECANF Released

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The [Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities](#) (CECANF or Commission) released its [final report](#) on March 17, 2016. Established in 2013, pursuant to the Protect Our Kids Act ([P.L. 112-275](#)), the [12-member Commission](#) was given a maximum of 3 years to study child protection policies and make recommendations for a "comprehensive national strategy" to reduce fatalities resulting from child abuse and neglect as well as guidelines for the type of information that should be tracked to prevent these fatalities.

Though it is not precisely known how many children die of abuse and neglect, [annual state-reported data show](#) an estimated 1,580 children died in FY2014 due to these causes. Children reported as having died from abuse and/or neglect are often young (in FY2014, 44% were under 1 year old).

The Commission heard testimony from more than 200 witnesses in numerous [public meetings](#) held across the country and received additional written statements from scores of researchers and stakeholder groups. Among its many findings were the following:

- Between four and eight children die each day from abuse or neglect and young children are most at risk.
- Coordinated, multisystem efforts are important because not all children who died were known to child protective services (CPS), but some were seen by other professionals, such as health professionals, before they died.
- Access to cross-agency and real-time information about families is vital to child protection efforts, but legal and policy barriers prevent this from occurring.
- More is known about what puts children at risk than about what practices reduce fatalities.
- A lack of standard definitions and under-reporting are part of why the exact number of children who die from abuse and neglect is not known; it is critical to have these data to understand how to prevent these deaths.
- Data on American Indian/Alaska Native child abuse and neglect fatalities are limited or non-existent and multiple jurisdictional claims add to challenges of understanding and serving these children and families.
- African American children are more than twice as likely as white or Hispanic children to die of child abuse and neglect.

The Commission calls for multiple community agencies and professionals (including law enforcement, CPS, and health)

to be held accountable for children's safety and recommends stronger federal support for a 21st century child welfare system through new policies, research, technical assistance, and funding. It offers roughly 100 specific recommendations in its [final report](#). As an immediate step toward reducing child abuse and neglect fatalities, it recommends an intensive state-level review of the five most recent years of data on them (using methodologies and practices approved by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)). This proposed two-year effort would culminate in the creation and implementation of state-specific plans to prevent child abuse and neglect fatalities. The Commission recommends expanded funding as part of carrying out this work. However, it did not agree on a single funding level or approach.

The Commission makes specific recommendations to address the lack of data and jurisdictional clarity around child abuse and neglect fatalities in Indian country. It also recommends changes to address the higher risk of child abuse and neglect fatalities for African American children—calling for pilot studies of "intact family courts" to help keep families together and recommending targeted training on family engagement and child welfare decisionmaking to ensure equitable treatment of all children and families.

Under the [Protect Our Kids Act](#), within six months of the Commission report's release (i.e., by mid-September 2016) any federal agency affected by a recommendation described in the report must submit a report to Congress describing its response to, and plans to address, the recommendation. A host of human services, health, and research agencies at HHS are addressed in the recommendations, as is the Department of Justice (DOJ) (including its Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)), and the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). The Commission recommends that congressional committees with oversight of relevant federal child welfare, health, and public health programs hold joint hearings to better align national policies, resources, and goals with regard to the safety of abused and neglected children.

Senators Hatch and Wyden, chair and ranking member, respectively, of the Senate Finance Committee, [both noted](#) the Commission's support of their unreleased draft proposal, referred to as the "Family First Act." Representative Buchanan, chair of the Subcommittee on Human Resources for the House Ways and Means Committee, which handles legislation on many [federal child welfare programs](#), [lauded](#) the commissioners' use of ideas developed in local communities. Representative Doggett, ranking member of that subcommittee and an author of the Protect Our Kids Act, called for federal and state leadership to move the work forward and [said](#) he was pleased by the unanimous support for home visiting.

Nine of the 12 [commissioners](#) supported the report. Two commissioners dissented; one commissioner resigned to take a job with DOJ prior to the final vote. In their separate dissents, Commissioners Bevan and Martin both agreed with parts of the final report, including their support for continued use of home visiting programs and the process known as "birth match" (information-sharing between vital records offices and CPS) to enable early identification of families and infants who may need extra attention and services. However, they both criticized the recommendation requiring each state to initiate retrospective reviews of child abuse and neglect fatalities. Commissioner Bevan [writes](#) that the Commission lacked evidence to support its statement that this effort would immediately save children's lives. In her independent [dissenting report](#), Commissioner Martin asserts that preventing child abuse and neglect fatalities must begin with preventing child abuse and neglect, and in a separate [letter](#) she argues that study must be made of both the risk factors in families where a child dies from abuse or neglect and the protective factors that exist in similarly situated families where no child dies.