Child Safety Forward: A National Initiative to Reduce Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities and Injuries Through a Collaborative, Community-Based Approach
Cook County Health, Illinois

The U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office for Victims of Crime is funding a demonstration initiative to develop multidisciplinary strategies and responses to address fatalities or near-death injuries as a result of child abuse or neglect. Cook County Health in Illinois was one of five demonstration sites in the nation chosen for this grant. The other sites include: Indiana State Department of Health; St. Francis Hospital in Hartford, Connecticut; Sacramento County’s Child Abuse Prevention Council and the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services.

Between FY2015 through FY2019, the Illinois Department of Child & Family Services (DCFS) Hotline received an average of 10,000 reports annually for deaths, or serious injuries, due to suspected child abuse or neglect. Although Cook County, the most densely populated county in Illinois, had the greatest number of reports for serious injuries, two other rural counties: Peoria and Vermilion, had higher rates of these serious injuries. The reasons for this disparity are poorly understood. To better understand this problem, Cook County Health will conduct a 5-year retrospective review of child fatalities and serious injuries, due to maltreatment.

It is estimated that half of all children who die from fatal injuries caused by child maltreatment have had no previous contact with the child welfare system. Cook County Health will take a public health approach by convening a multi-disciplinary group of community stakeholders that work with vulnerable families in a variety of different settings. The identified stakeholders will include healthcare providers, community health workers, maternal infant health providers, educators and social service providers. They will be joined by professionals in the legal, law enforcement, child welfare, and child advocacy fields to explore potential service gaps that may place children at risk for maltreatment. The work will be focused in three Illinois counties: Cook, Peoria, and Vermilion, with a goal of identifying the unique risk factors that may explain the higher rates of serious injuries in Peoria and Vermilion Counties. The multi-disciplinary collaborative will also examine which community-based interventions or services are most effective at preventing child maltreatment in these three counties.

In addition to facilitating information sharing among the stakeholders and child maltreatment professionals, Cook County Health will:

- Convene simulation training, conducted by the Child Protection Academy at the University of Illinois Springfield, for investigators from child welfare (DCFS) and law enforcement from all three counties.
- Convene multi-disciplinary team training, conducted by Hoyleton Youth & Family Services, for DCFS and law enforcement investigators from Peoria & Vermilion County. This multi-disciplinary training will help hone their collaborative skills and improve the efficiency and accuracy of decision making.
- Facilitate access to telehealth services with a Child Abuse Pediatrician to Vermilion County, which has not had access to this expertise in the past.
- Utilize geospatial risk analysis mapping to demonstrate neighborhood “hot spots” of interpersonal violence. This information will assist in planning the implementation of services, which will include input from community members to include addressing potential barriers to accessing these services.
- Develop a sustainability plan, based on the collaborative efforts of the full team, as a critical element to the long-term success of the effort.

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