

Report: McKean County child abuse rates more than twice state average

By **MARCIE SCHELLHAMMER**
Era Reporter
marcie@bradfordera.com

A report released Tuesday by a statewide watchdog group for children says McKean County still has a serious problem with child abuse.

The Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children released a report Tuesday that outlines the state of child welfare in all 67 counties in Pennsylvania, using data from the 2008 Child Abuse Report.

An alarming finding is that McKean County's rate of child abuse reports is more than twice the state average. There were 218 reports made from McKean County in 2008 through the ChildLine and Abuse Registry. McKean County's rate of abuse reports was 19 per 1,000 children. The average for other rural counties was 10 per 1,000; while the average for the state was 8.3 per 1,000.

Of those abuse reports, 15.6 percent in McKean County were substantiated abuse, while 16.4 percent were substantiated abuse in the state average.

The rate of repeated child abuse, where the same child has another substantiated report after the first one, is also detailed. In McKean County, the rate is 1 in 6 children; in the state, the rate is 1 in 11.

Duane Wolfe, director of McKean County Children and Youth Services, acknowledged there is a problem in the county.

"It is true that McKean County continues to have a high number of reports coming into the agency," Wolfe said. "Many of these reports are coming from mandated reporters throughout the county as we conduct various mandated reporter trainings for providers."

Joan Benso, executive director of the Partnerships for Children, said there is a definite correlation between child abuse and neglect, and poverty.

"Clearly your county is challenged economically, which puts more kids at risk," Benso said. "When we look at the McKean County data, what we see is a county that does seem to have more child abuse than more rural counties."

Wolfe agreed that the economy has an impact on abuse.

"I believe, in part, that economics plays a part of abusive and neglectful situations. Stress can lead to anger and the outlet is not always positive. Also, with the tough economic times, families can fall into trouble and need some help," Wolfe said. "We, along with many other providers in the county, attempt to provide support and help to these families."

He added that the abuse problem in McKean County has many more factors than just the economy. Traditionally, the county has had problems with abuse and neglect in a generational form, "where it is done over years" in a family. The grandfather may have abused a parent, and then the parent abuses their child, leading to a family dynamic of abuse.

In poor economic times, such as have been witnessed in 2009 across the nation, services to help combat abuse are sometimes cut because of financial problems in a county or municipality.

In poor economic times, such as have been witnessed in 2009 across the nation, services to help combat abuse are sometimes cut because of financial problems in a county or municipality.

In McKean County, the Children and Youth Services budget was cut both at the state level and at the county level.

"As with everyone's budget, when there are cuts, it is usually never a good situation," Wolfe said. He lauded the staff and local service providers with their work to make the best of the situation.

"We began preparing for decreased funding early in 2009," Wolfe said. He said the agency began planning with the county commissioners early on, as the commissioners have been working to not raise taxes.

"They have taken steps to look and see where we could save money without cutting staff and services. We began to have caseworkers double up in county vehicles, watched where and how we spent our money, as well as the providers doing the same," Wolfe explained. "When it is all said and done, we do have less money, but better practices have helped us maintain all services that we currently provide. We are hopeful to maintain these services at the same rate in the future."

Meanwhile, the Partnerships report also details the foster care system in the county.

There were 88 children entered into McKean County's foster care program during 2008, 60.2 percent of whom were first-time entries. There were a total of 159 children in foster care, with 44 percent of them aged 13 or older. The average time spent in foster care is 1.5 months, which is far better number than the state at 10.7 months.

Most of the children in foster care were in a non-relative foster home — 52.8 percent; while 32.7 percent were in group homes.

On a positive note, the report lists that 79.7 percent of children who entered foster care for the first time in 2008 were reunified with their parents or discharged to relatives within the next 12 months. That number was only 54.8 percent for other rural counties, and 48.2 percent for the state.

However, the percentage of children who re-entered foster care in fewer than 12 months was at 31.6 percent. The state average was 27.8 percent.

The report also lists the percentages of children leaving foster care, and the reason for departure from the system. The top is reunification, at 79.3 percent; followed by living with relatives at 7.3 percent; and adoption at 6.1 percent.