

Series to examine child abuse issues in McKean County

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McKean County has been in the midst of a disturbing trend for the past several years, and it's putting at risk the most vulnerable of our citizens.

Substantiated reports of child abuse have remained higher than the state average since at least 2002. And according to the Pennsylvania Annual Child Abuse Report for 2007, the rate remains one of the highest in the state.

For the state, there were 1.4 substantiated reports for 1,000 children in 2007; for McKean County, there were 3.9 substantiated reports for 1,000 children. The previous year, the McKean County rate was 2.8 substantiated reports for 1,000 children, while the state average was 1.4.

The McKean County Collaborative Board — a “network of McKean County organizations that promote strong families, healthy childhood and positive youth development,” according to Lee Sizemore, director of the McKean County Family Centers — is working to reverse that trend not only by helping children, but by helping educate parents on what to do when feeling overwhelmed.

April is National Child Abuse Prevention Month. The statewide theme, “Parenting is one tough job,” is being supplemented by the Collaborative Board, which added, “but we're here to help.”

The National Child Welfare Information Gateway has identified five protective factors that research has shown reduce the risk of child abuse and neglect. Those factors are the following: nurturing and attachment, knowledge of parenting and of child and youth development, parental resilience, social connections and concrete supports for parents.

Several service providers in McKean County recently spoke to The Era, explaining the protective factors and the services available locally to help parents use those factors to strengthen their families.

“Children deserve the best you can give them,” states a public service announcement by the Board. “They will someday carry on what you have started, sit where you are sitting and be here when you are gone. But children don't come with instructions.

“Being a parent is the hardest job there is. Maybe you have a lot of stress in your life and just can't seem to get things together for your kids. Maybe you want to be a different parent than you had growing up. Or maybe you just need to talk to someone who understands.”

There are all kinds of services available right in McKean County to help out, and the Collaborative Board wants to help parents understand what's available and where they can turn — instead of getting angry, stressed or frustrated with a child to the point where abuse might happen.

The McKean County Family Centers have an agency in each geographical area — Bradford, Eldred, Smethport, Kane and Port Allegany. There are programs available for parents of children from birth through teenage years.

McKean County Children and Youth Services has phone lines open around the clock, with someone ready to help or refer a parent to what services might best fit the situation.

As more people turn to the services available right here in the community, the child abuse declines.

For anyone looking for a list of services or providers, the McKean County Resource Directory is available on the Internet.