

PFSA's Statewide Research Project

Introduction:

As many of you are aware, PA Family Support Alliance has been a statewide leader in the fight against child abuse for the past 35 years. PFSA protects the children of our Commonwealth by providing services that have stood the test of time and research for parents, professionals who are mandated reporters of child abuse and our general citizenry through the Front Porch Project. PFSA's reputation for quality, effective services is rooted in listening to what people say they need and making it available to them. We began that way in the mid 1970's with the first parent support group in Indiana County, continued that tradition in 1995 when we raised private funds from a family foundation to begin the training program on child abuse recognition and reporting for mandated reporters and followed suit in 2012 when we introduced the front porch project- the direct result of the citizens of York County expressing outrage at the beating death of a two year-old little girl and their frustration at not knowing what to do when they believe a child in their midst is unsafe.

As the legislature reviewed the recommendations of the Task Force and worked tirelessly to introduce sweeping changes to our Child Protective Services Law, PFSA board leadership conducted strategic planning and found themselves stating the obvious- in order to better protect PA's children we must do a better job of engaging community members- our citizens to play a role in child protection. The need for this is clearly reflected in our state's 2013 Annual Child Abuse Report where we see that 38 children were killed (5 more than the previous year) and that 47% of those children were not known by the child welfare system. Also noteworthy is that child deaths due to lack of supervision quadrupled from 2012 to 2013.

In order to encourage citizens to look out for the safety and well-being of children in their communities and public areas we must first understand what the general population believes about the prevalence of child abuse, the treatment of children and what triggers them to intervene on behalf of a child. PFSA engaged the services of the Center for Opinion Research to conduct a statewide research project so we can make informed decisions around messaging and an education campaign that will raise the social conscience of our citizens on the issue of child protection.

Dr. Berwood Yost is Director of the Center for Opinion Research at Franklin and Marshall College where he also teaches courses in research methods and public health.

Mr. Yost has extensive experience in designing and implementing public opinion research using both qualitative and quantitative methods, and has conducted funded research on behalf of government, business, nonprofit organizations, public utilities, higher education, and the media. Prior to assuming his present post, he served as

Director of the Center for Opinion Research at Millersville University, where he also lectured in public policy and research methods.

He has published nearly two dozen articles in scholarly journals, including *Addictive Behaviors*, *American Journal of Public Health*, *Commonwealth*, *Criminology & Public Policy*, *Tobacco Control*, and *Women's Health Issues*. His writings have appeared in *The Polling Report*, *Pollster.com*, *Public Opinion Pros*, and *Survey Research*, which are published for the professional survey research community. The results of Mr. Yost's research have also appeared in major new outlets, including the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and the *Philadelphia Daily News*.

Mr. Yost has made numerous conference presentations based on the results and analysis of survey research he has designed and administered. He currently serves as head methodologist for the Franklin and Marshall College Poll (formerly the Keystone Poll), which tracks public attitudes toward policy issues and political campaigns. The Poll, an ongoing survey activity of the Center for Opinion Research and the Center for Politics and Public Affairs, has become the state's most respected pre-election survey due to its accuracy in forecasting election outcomes.

Dr. Yost Comments:

Excerpt Findings from *Childhood at Risk White Paper*

Report from the Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance and the Center for Opinion Research

Methodology

The Center for Opinion Research at Franklin and Marshall College initially conducted a telephone survey of 1,004 adult residents across the Commonwealth during November and December 2013. The survey design was guided by a series of eight focus groups conducted throughout the state. Taken together, the research results provide insights into citizens' attitudes about child abuse and the thinking that supports them. All participants' comments were reviewed and categorized to identify the key themes.

Key Themes

Extremely Limited Awareness of the Issue Itself: There is extremely limited awareness of the issue of child abuse itself, as well as a lack of knowledge on how to recognize and report abuse.

Best Predictors for Reporting Abuse: There may be specific attitudinal, psychological or environmental variables that determine who is likely to get involved when they encounter potentially abusive or neglectful situations.

What Constitutes Abuse: There is a great deal of ambiguity about what constitutes abuse or neglect.

Barriers to Reporting or Intervening in Potential Abusive Situations: There can often be too much uncertainty of context and too many impediments to intervening in potentially abusive situations.

Personal Conflict about Abuse: There is significant personal conflict about child discipline that contributes to judgments about abuse.

Burden of Proof: Most people need to see physical proof of abuse before they will take action.