

September 19, 2012

Testimony to the Pennsylvania House of Representatives Education Committee

Members of the House Education Committee and all of those in this audience:

My name is Dr. Paula George. I am a board certified pediatrician with additional training, experience, and board certification, in Child Abuse Pediatrics.

I have been working for nearly 8 years at the Children's Resource Center of PinnacleHealth, and have been honored to be the medical director there for the last 7 years.

The Children's Resource Center is a nationally accredited children's advocacy center, a child-focused, program under Pinnacle Health System where children who may have been abused are evaluated by a multidisciplinary team that includes child and family advocates, forensic interviewers, medical professionals, prosecutors and investigators of abuse from Children and Youth and law enforcement.

The Children's Resource Center is involved not only in the assessment of children, but also in the training of team members, medical professionals, advocates, and community members on child sexual abuse: We support and promote prevention programs including the Nurse Family Partnership.

At the Children's Resource Center we see over 800 children a year who are referred to us because of concerns of possible abuse. Approximately 80% of the children we evaluate are suspected to be victims of sexual abuse. In my career I have been involved in the evaluation of over 5000 children who may have been sexually abused or exploited. I have seen first hand the effects on many victims – behavior problems, depression, aggression, poor school performance, delinquency, drug use, promiscuity, teen pregnancy and more. And unrecognized and untreated abuse of children is associated with adult problems of criminal behavior, drug and alcohol addiction, poor parenting, mental and physical health problems, and much more.

The majority of children who disclose sexual abuse make their first disclosure months to years after abuse has started. Why is this true? Children are most often sexually abused by people they know and trust. Young children may not have the language skills to communicate about the abuse, and they may not understand that the experience is abusive, particularly if the sexual abuse is made into a game. By the time a child is old enough to understand that what is happening to them is wrong, they may be ashamed or feel the abuse is their fault for not telling sooner. Many are afraid to talk about a sexual situation, afraid they will be in trouble. Many children tell me they were afraid that no one would believe them. Many say they did tell an adult, but the adult didn't believe them or didn't understand. When the abuser is someone the child or the family cares about, the child

may worry about getting that person in trouble. And sometimes children are threatened and don't know, or don't believe, that they can be protected.

In fact it is not unusual for the parent of a child victim to disclose to me that he or she was sexually abused themselves as a child. Often this is the first time they have told anyone.

The best defense against the crime of sexual exploitation is knowledge and education. Adults need to have the knowledge to recognize sexual abuse, believe children when they tell, and protect children from situations in which they may be victimized. Children need to know what sexual exploitation is, so they can recognize events in their own lives that may place them in danger, and so they have the tools to tell adults if something suspicious is happening to them.

House Bill 2318 mandates such education to Pennsylvania children in Kindergarten through 8th grade. By educating our children, we educate the adults and parents that these children will become. And parents will learn, through their children, about sexual abuse and how to recognize and prevent it. Teachers and administrators will learn so they can teach our children. Through our children, this education will trickle UP to adult citizens of our Commonwealth.

Sexual abuse of a child is a hidden crime and most of the victims suffer in silence for months or years before they tell. Imagine: in one generation, every young adult who grew up in Pennsylvania will know what sexual abuse is – and how to prevent it. Only through our schools can we hope to educate not only all our children, but all future adults.

Thank you for your time and attention

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