



Within Our Reach

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*******PRESS RELEASE*******

COOK COUNTY HEALTH'S PROJECT CHILD RELEASES CHILD SAFETY FORWARD EVALUATION REPORT HIGHLIGHTING FINDINGS IN MULTI-YEAR EFFORT TO DEVELOP STRATEGIES TO REDUCE CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT ACROSS ILLINOIS

COOK COUNTY, IL – Cook County Health's Project CHILD (Collaboration of Helpers Lowering Deaths of Children), today released their final evaluation report for the [Child Safety Forward](#) initiative funded by the Department of Justice (DOJ) with technical assistance led by Social Current. Child Safety Forward is a multi-year demonstration initiative, launched in October 2019 by the DOJ's Office for Victims of Crime, that engaged five sites across the United States in research, planning and implementation around strategies aimed at reducing child injury and fatality from abuse and neglect.

"Our data review indicated that an average of 10,000 serious child injuries or deaths due to suspected abuse or neglect are reported annually in the state of Illinois with higher rates in rural counties such as Peoria and Vermilion than the more densely populated Cook County," noted Verleaner Lane, project director for Cook County Health's Project CHILD. "We also found that 50 percent of the children who die from fatal injuries caused by maltreatment are unknown to the child welfare system. This data led us to take a public health approach by convening a multi-disciplinary group of community stakeholders who work to support families in a variety of different settings. The identified stakeholders included healthcare providers, community health workers, maternal infant health providers, educators, and social service providers."

The late Marjorie Fujara, a world-renowned child abuse pediatrician, who led Project CHILD before her passing in 2021, noted during the initial planning phase of the project: "Child protective services, law enforcement, and medical professionals have worked together to investigate and respond to cases of child maltreatment and resulting deaths, but none have produced lasting results in terms of preventing child fatalities because of the lack of communication and bureaucratic nature between each agency; this has produced gaps in the system that have led to dire consequences. This project aims to identify the gaps and barriers to current approaches, policies, and procedures that exist to address child abuse and neglect in children aged three years and younger in three specific Illinois counties (Cook, Vermilion, and Peoria), to determine what prevention and intervention strategies work best for families in this area, and to ultimately decrease the number of child fatalities, near fatalities, and recurring child injuries caused by child abuse and neglect in those three Illinois counties."

Key elements of the project strategy included:

- Use of simulation training, conducted by the Child Protection Training Academy at the University of Illinois Springfield, for investigators from child welfare and law enforcement from all three counties.
- Convening of multi-disciplinary team training, conducted by Hoyleton Youth & Family Services, for IL Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and law enforcement investigators from Peoria & Vermilion County. This multi-disciplinary training was designed to help hone their collaborative skills and improve the efficiency and accuracy of decision-making.
- Utilization of geospatial risk analysis mapping to demonstrate neighborhood “hot spots” of interpersonal violence. This information was used to assist in planning the implementation of services, which included input from community members with a focus on addressing potential barriers to accessing these services.
- Development of a sustainability plan, based on the collaborative efforts of the full team, as a critical element to the long-term success of the effort.

The multi-disciplinary team (MDT) was comprised of the following organizations: Children's Advocacy Center of Illinois; Chicago Children's Advocacy Center; Office of the Inspector General Illinois; Hoyleton Youth and Family Services; The University of Illinois: Child Protection Training Academy Simulation Lab; Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago: Child Abuse Pediatrics -Telehealth Partnership for Resilience (Educators); Be Strong Families (parent engagement); Illinois Department of Children and Family Services; EverThrive Illinois; Calumet Public School District 132; IL State Police-Effingham; Alton Police Dept. Force Commander of the Southern IL Child Death Investigation Task Force; Southern Investigations Commander Division of Criminal Investigation 18; and more.

Among the insights from the Project CHILD strategies was the importance and impact of simulation training. The Child Protection Training Academy, located on the University of Illinois Springfield campus had created a simulation training model for DCFS Child Protection Investigators, which they deployed on behalf of the Project CHILD team. The simulation training utilized the “Hailey” scenario – one of the four cases created in partnership with the University of Missouri STL as part of a project with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) called FORECAST. The Hailey case involved training for recognizing elements of unsafe sleep practices based on a fictional family with numerous underlying conditions including domestic violence, mental health concerns, substance use disorder, and suspicions of sexual & physical abuse.

The first MDT participated in simulation training on October 20, 2021, with 12 participants representing law enforcement, child protection, CAC staff and prosecution. To draw attention to unsafe sleep practices, the environment was staged with a pack and play that was cluttered with clothing, bedding, and other objects. In addition to the pack and play concerns, the team strategically placed the simulation doll on a soft couch, to draw attention to other risk factors for unsafe sleep. Though the training was conducted on Zoom, the teams were able to “investigate” the environment through the use of the “proxy” who walked through the home with a camera, enabling the participants to see the home and its contents. Team members could ask for close up examination of particular items in order to determine what questions they might need to ask to gather additional evidence. Later trainings added additional risk factors within the house, such as a premature infant, smoking, and an additional toddler.

One of the key takeaways from the simulation training was that safe sleep issues were often not the primary concerns of members of the MDT as they observed the family's home. In fact, upon interviewing the team, Project CHILD learned that safe sleep practices are rarely included in law enforcement training.

“The work of the Cook County Health Project CHILD team has shed new light on developing and implementing a true multi-disciplinary, public health approach to preventing child abuse and neglect injuries and fatalities,” noted Amy Templeman, director of the Within our Reach team at Social Current and the head of the technical assistance team. “Their use of simulation training to identify not just risk factors but areas of needed improvement in training across multiple disciplines offers us a road map to help inform the field of child welfare and partners in best practices moving forward.”

“We have known for some time that reducing child maltreatment injury and death is a goal that encompasses a wide range of systems and cannot be solved by child welfare alone,” noted Stacy Phillips, Victim Justice Program Specialist with the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) within the U.S. Department of Justice. “The Cook County Project CHILD initiative is helping us identify the stakeholders who have an important role to play in keeping children safe and the tools and resources they need to be effective.”

In addition to Cook County Health, the other Child Safety Forward demonstration sites include: St. Francis Hospital in Hartford, Connecticut; Indiana Department of Health; Sacramento County CA’s Child Abuse Prevention Council; and the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. The final report from St. Francis Hospital was released in February 2023 and can be accessed [here](#). The remaining final reports will be issued in the summer/fall of 2023. The technical assistance team is led by Within Our Reach, an office at Social Current.

About the Within Our Reach Office

[Within Our Reach](#) is an office established within Social Current (formerly the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities) to further the recommendations of the federal [Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities](#). The goal of Within Our Reach is to equip policymakers, practitioners, and advocates with the tools they need to fundamentally reform child welfare. Based on the commission’s national strategy, desired reform includes a proactive public health approach—a shared family and community responsibility to keep children safe. Within Our Reach is made possible through collaboration with Casey Family Programs, whose mission is to provide, improve, and prevent the need for foster care.

About Social Current

Social Current activates the power of the social sector by bringing together a dynamic network of human/social service organizations and partners. Leveraging the collective experience of the field and research, we energize and activate the sector and drive continuous evolution and improvement. Social Current amplifies the work of the social sector through collaboration, innovation, policy, and practice excellence. We offer access to intellectual capital of thousands of professionals within our network through peer groups, learning opportunities, collective advocacy, individualized consultation, tools, and resources that address the sector’s most critical challenges.

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