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METRO

Services To Stop Neglect Are Vital, Department Says

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APRIL IS CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION MONTH

TALLAHASSEE - About 130,000 Florida children were abused or suffered from neglect last year, according to Florida's Department of Children and Families.

But the number of unreported abuse and neglect cases probably pushes the total closer to an estimated 600,000, according to a report by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Many of the children in the unreported cases could have received help if more people knew about the state's child abuse prevention services, according to the state agency.

To focus attention on those programs, the department has declared April Child Abuse Prevention month.

"This month is dedicated to letting parents know about the considerable amount of support and assistance that is available to help them cope with sometimes overwhelming circumstances," said Kathleen Kearney, head of the state agency.

The Department of Children and Families works with other family service organizations to provide the free help.

For example, **Healthy Families** Florida, a statewide program under the aegis of the Ounce of Prevention Fund of Florida, provides home visits by trained family support workers.

" **Healthy Families** Florida's primary focus is to equip families with the skills they need to build on their strengths and foster positive relationships with their children," said Carol McNally, the program's executive director.

Neighborhood partnerships, networks of community residents, churches, schools, and businesses, also are working with the state agency to protect children.

Such partnerships have been established in 12 Florida neighborhoods, including Tampa's University West area.

The Parent HelpLine, run by the Family Source of Florida, is a 24- hour statewide, toll-free confidential telephone crisis hot line geared to provide immediate support for families through local authorities. The Parent HelpLine number is 1-800-FLA-LOVE (1-800- 352- 5683).

"Cases of abuse are often underreported because of all the circumstances that make people not want to tell," said Don Policella, regional program administrator for family safety at the Department of Children and Families Suncoast Region in Tampa. "We try very hard to promote the hot line number, to get that word out and get people to make those calls."

Kearney also responded this week to criticism of her department over the placement of foster children as young as 3 years old for up to 105 days at Lakeside Alternatives, a community mental health center in Orange County.

Crisis units normally hold children for evaluation no more than 10 days before sending them home or transferring them to treatment centers.

"Kids that have been abused and neglected have significant mental health and behavioral issues," Kearney said. "Because of the abuse, most of the kids in care are in need of treatment. All of the children in foster care are being overseen by a juvenile court judge, so the judge is aware of the placement and the need for those types of interventions and treatments."

Kearney said 90 percent of the children admitted to the Lakeside facility were admitted by law enforcement officials, not by her department's workers.

Lawmakers and other government officials said this week they plan to investigate the situation at Lakeside.

PHOTO; Caption: Kathleen Kearney Department of Children and Families head said parents have access to assistance.