



# Commentary

**Contacts: Marcy Mallory and Jeff Gingerich, PBA Communications**  
[communications@pabar.org](mailto:communications@pabar.org) • 1-800-932-0311

Editor's note: Please consider printing this information about reporting child abuse written by Thomas G. Wilkinson Jr., President, Pennsylvania Bar Association.

## **Reporting Suspected Child Abuse Takes One Phone Call**

Recent high profile court cases in our state have brought child abuse to the forefront of news coverage. But, it is important to remember that child abuse is ever-present in Pennsylvania – and the numbers of children suffering abuse are disturbing.

The Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare compiled these recent facts and figures:

- Last year in Pennsylvania, 34 children died from abuse and in 77 percent of these cases, the perpetrators were the parents. Another 41 children suffered near fatal abuse.
- Approximately two-thirds of the injuries in substantiated reports of child abuse were sexual in nature. These injuries were the result of sexual assault, rape and incest. Additional injuries ranged from cuts and bruises to skull fractures and scalding.
- Child abuse has no geographical boundaries. Reported and substantiated cases of child abuse occurred in all 67 Pennsylvania counties last year.
- Last year, approximately 3,400 cases of reported child abuse were substantiated.

Clearly, children need each of us to keep a watchful eye for signs of abuse and to take action if child abuse is suspected.

Under Pennsylvania law, those who work directly with children as part of our jobs are mandated to report abuse. Bottom line, each of us has a duty to protect children and, if we suspect abuse is occurring, that duty starts with a phone call to ChildLine.

ChildLine can be reached toll-free at 1-800-932-0313. It is staffed around the clock every day of the year by employees of the Department of Public Welfare.

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As a guiding principle, you should immediately report cases in which you have a reasonable cause to suspect child abuse has occurred. Firsthand observation of abuse is not required. If a report is made based on good faith suspicion that abuse is occurring or has occurred, you will be immune from any resulting legal proceedings.

If you believe there is imminent danger of a crime being committed against a child or if you suspect that a child is being left alone and that child is too young to be left without supervision, you should call the ChildLine and the local police for immediate investigation.

It is up to ChildLine to forward information to the county agency providing child protective services and to officials providing other services that protect children.

Do not conduct your own investigation in an effort to obtain additional information about the suspected abuse and you should in no way interfere with any official investigation by authorities.

If you make a report or cooperate in an investigation, your identity is to be kept confidential by child protective services personnel and law enforcement officials. However, with written consent, you can voluntarily have your name released. Also, in some cases, the Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare may release information if there is a determination that such a disclosure would not be harmful to your safety.

We need to work together to reduce the numbers of children suffering abuse. Every child deserves to grow up in a safe environment. If you suspect a child is being abused, take action by alerting ChildLine.

*Thomas G. Wilkinson Jr. is president of the Pennsylvania Bar Association, the state's largest association for lawyers. As part of its ongoing public education programs, the association has a free brochure about reporting child abuse available on its website, [www.pabar.org](http://www.pabar.org).*

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Source: Pennsylvania Bar Association, 100 South Street, Harrisburg, PA 17102