



The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
House Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

2 June 2020

RE: Leading Organizations and Child Sexual Abuse Survivors Call for Significant FY2020 Emergency Supplemental Funding for Child Safety and Protection Programs in the Next COVID-19 Relief Package

Dear Speaker Pelosi and Leaders McConnell, Schumer, and McCarthy,

The COVID-19 pandemic is having a devastating impact across the world. Efforts to contain the coronavirus are vital to the health of the world's population, but they are also exposing children, adolescents, and women to increased risk of violence. As survivors of abuse in childhood ourselves, and as leading organizations working to prevent and respond to abuse in childhood, we know that child abuse was already rampant before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and that children are at risk for child abuse at home and in their neighborhoods; a third of abusers are close family members, and over 80% are known to the child.¹

With the onset of the pandemic, the risk of abuse in the home and online is increasing significantly. We are supportive of the efforts of many organizations and individuals to ensure that the response to COVID-19 also ensures the safety of women. Our hope with this letter is to call attention to the specific issues faced by children. **For both women and children, staying safe should go beyond protecting people from the coronavirus and must include preventing all forms of domestic violence and child abuse, including child sexual abuse and exploitation.**

¹ <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/perpetrators-sexual-violence>

Many children are now hidden from an army of caring adults, community members and mandated reporters who would have protected them: friends, neighbors, family members, teachers, doctors, dentists, and even child protective service professionals. As families struggle with disruptions in routine, isolation from society, financial insecurity, stress, and anxiety, the risk of child abuse in all its forms is on the rise—particularly for children already living in vulnerable situations. Millions of children now lack access to the safe spaces, services, and people that schools provide. Moreover, many states have sidelined child protective service workers and have failed to provide personal protective equipment to ensure our child welfare professionals can be in contact with our most at-risk youth.

With the onset of the U.S. stay-at-home order response to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, states are reporting a significant decrease in expected child abuse reports as compared to last year², while at the same time there is an increase of reported abuse-related childhood injuries requiring hospitalization.^{3 4} There is also an increase in reports by children themselves to hotlines.⁵ **In a world without doctors, teachers, child protective services, and advocates to identify and report abuse, only the most severe cases are surfacing--and severe abuse is on the rise.**

In addition, large numbers of children are spending unprecedented time online. While online communities have become central to learning, support and play for children, they also increase exposure to online violence, including sexual exploitation and abuse. There has been a marked increase in reports of online exploitation of children since the pandemic began.⁶ This increase may stem from a variety of factors, but we know that COVID is exacerbating the already urgent issue of online child sexual exploitation.

Many children are not in contact with any mandated reporters, including their teachers, because they lack computers and/or adequate WiFi. These children need to be educated, but this equipment could also provide a much-needed link to the outside world for those children who need it. We need to ensure children have access to the equipment and services necessary to be online, while at the same time ensuring their safety.

Given the severity of the issues presented, **we call on Congress to invest at least \$300 million in “emergency funding” to strengthen child safety and protection programs in the next COVID-19 Relief Package.** In addition, we join together with the large coalition of child welfare advocates in calling for *significant funding* increases for Child Abuse Prevention Treatment Act (CAPTA) State and Prevention grants and other child abuse prevention and intervention programs within the Department of Health and Human Services.

²<https://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/coronavirus/calls-to-pa-child-safety-line-down-60-worrying-advocates/2388769/?fbclid=IwAR00AyygMUfEPN-vC7SQ-FzrClfxPC1v5aOdhLo0Qzw5CldOpztFcpNJJ04>

³<https://dfw.cbslocal.com/2020/03/20/texas-hospital-spike-severe-child-abuse-cases-coronavirus/>

⁴https://foxsanantonio.com/news/nation-world/with-no-school-calls-drop-but-child-abuse-hasnt-amid-virus-04-18-2020?fbclid=IwAR0GKltJSxCy7QbeVjC0a08JJPdyZhv6YUAcQlxt9Z_3qGOTmFos1u6TGHQ

⁵https://www.rainn.org/news/first-time-ever-minors-make-half-visitors-national-sexual-assault-hotline?fbclid=IwAR2kzDtVQBzN1Yo0qVyMcYHYwQs7Pp6M_jdiuitUKIG7xrXvbWTv718lxjQ

⁶<https://www.forbes.com/sites/thomasbrewster/2020/04/24/child-exploitation-complaints-rise-106-to-hit-2-million-in-july-st-one-month-is-covid-19-to-blame/#37b874f74c9c>

We believe that a broader response to COVID-19 *must* include comprehensive protections from violence for children and adolescents, and *must* include additional resources to reinforce and expand current programs that not only prevent child abuse and exploitation and protect vulnerable children, but also provide trauma-informed care and services that help abused children heal and seek justice.

For example, federal programs that fund victim-focused children’s advocacy centers and domestic violence shelters provide funds that help families seek justice and heal. Prevention programs such as CHILD USA, Darkness to Light, Family Justice Centers, and other Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention programs funded through CAPTA work together with families and communities in hopes of preventing the abuse from happening in the first place. In addition, federal, state and local organizations and law enforcement task forces play a critical role in combating child sexual abuse and exploitation online.

These programs are needed now more than ever, thus we urge Congress to provide at least \$300 million in emergency funds to child safety programs within the Departments of Justice (DOJ), Health and Human Services (HHS), and Education (DoE) so that States, local governments, and non-governmental organizations can build and expand on the services they are already providing children that have been abused, or are at risk. It is critical that these programs remain fully funded, and have additional resources to handle the likely increased need for services due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

We call on you to:

- Expand funding to ensure continuity of essential health and social welfare services, including mental health and psychosocial support—by providing professionals with the personal protection equipment (PPE) and online technology needed to continue working.
- Expand funding for additional psychologists, social workers, and counselors to help children and adolescents who are experiencing COVID-19 related trauma and expand funding for existing crisis support hotlines to meet increased demand.
- Expand funding to train educators and teachers, frontline health workers, and truancy officers on the best practices for identifying child abuse and exploitation while interacting with families through online learning and/or telemedicine visits. The program must adapt and incorporate safety modules into on-line schooling and telemedicine visits.
- Expand funding for underprivileged children to receive computers and WiFi access as part of their educational and safety needs, and ensure that all computers, tablets and laptops issued are equipped with online safety programs to block harmful content and establish safety standards.
- Expand funding to federal, state, and local law enforcement and other relevant programs to curb the rise in child sexual exploitation and abuse online.
- Expand funding to address the heightened risk of online harm, by ensuring safe networks for children, such as those utilized at schools, therefore maximizing online safety and eliminating access to dangerous sites and protecting children from online predators.
- Require states that receive funding to implement a child abuse reporting functions (chat, email, text or other means) into their state and local online learning platforms to enable children and adolescents to report abuse directly to their states child abuse hotline, and ensure children and adolescents are aware of these platforms.

- Expand requirements and encourage voluntary and proactive efforts for technology and communications to increase detection and take action to stop harmful activity against children online, including grooming and the creation and distribution of child sexual abuse images and videos.
- Expand public education and awareness campaigns on domestic violence and child abuse, including prevention, ways to identify warning signs of potential violence at home, how to access services, and how a neighbor or friend can assist someone experiencing abuse--including in education and food security efforts, in both rural and urban communities.
- Expand existing funding to grass-roots organizations at the front-lines of protecting children for programs that target diverse ethnic and religious communities, in multiple languages, and that provide trauma-informed care for survivors and support for professionals who work to protect children.
- Expand public education and awareness on hotlines and other services available to women, children and adolescents who may experience violence, including those living in areas under movement restrictions, under quarantine, or those infected with COVID-19.
- Invest in new systems to identify, prevent and report child abuse, including expanded efforts to establish online filing of restraining orders and a one-number federal hotline that will provide the information needed to callers regarding child protection services in each state and at the federal level.
- Expanded funding for resources that support people concerned about their own thoughts or behaviors and seeking help to live safe, offense-free lives, focusing on both prevention and response.

As a united front of adult survivors of child sexual abuse and exploitation and national leaders in the fight against child abuse and neglect, we welcome the opportunity to work with you and your staff on these very important and timely issues. **The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted serious problems for children at home and underprivileged children. We should not lose this opportunity to make the world safer for children.**

Should questions arise, if you need additional information, or if you or your staff would like to meet with members of this movement, to discuss these issues, please contact Denise Edwards at National Children’s Alliance: dedwards@nca-online.org or Paul Zeitz at Together for Girls: at drpaulzeitz@gmail.com.

Sincerely,

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