

Capital News Service

Child abuse rate among the highest in Cheboygan County

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BY JENNIFER CHEN

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LANSING – More children are facing abuse and neglect in the state due to unemployment and reduced incomes, with the situation worst in Cheboygan County, according to a social welfare advocacy group.

More than 32,000 children statewide were reported as abused or neglected in 2010 — a 34 percent increase from a decade ago.

Cheboygan is among the top three leading counties with abuse reports, with almost five out of every 100 children confirmed abused in 2010, according to the Michigan League for Human Services.

“Substance abuse and limited resources would be the main reasons for child abuse and neglect in Cheboygan,” said Debra Turnbull, the coordinator of Cheboygan County Child Advocacy Council.

“Cheboygan is a small rural community with limited resources,” she said.

“State and federal budget cuts means we must do more with less. There are several programs in place to address the problems,” Turnbull said.

The statewide rate was about 1.4 children per 100.

Lake and Roscommon are the other counties with the highest abuse and neglect rate.

Michele Corey, vice president of Michigan’s Children, said, “Children in poverty often experience hunger, abuse or neglect, extreme stress, depression, anxiety and other issues impacting their overall health, as well as their ability to learn and grow into successful adults.”

Her group is a partner with the league in advocating child protection policies.

The league said recent changes, including the reduced Earned Income Tax Credit and time limits on cash assistance and jobless benefits, have cut family support and pushed more children into poverty.

“The impact of high unemployment and declining wages is leaving its mark on a generation of children,” said Jane Zehnder-Merrell, a senior research associate at the league. “Unfortunately, policymakers have cut family supports aimed at blunting the impact of the economic downturn on kids.”

But Rep. Bruce Rendon, R-Lake City, a member of the House Families, Children and Seniors Committee, disagreed.

“The structural changes we made last year were bold but necessary,” he said about reduced benefits and tax credits.

Rendon said the growth of small business is the top priority to improve the state’s economic health. “I wholeheartedly believe that we will see families’ and children’s personal circumstances improve as well.”

Last year, the state reduced the Earned Income Tax Credit from 20 to 6 percent for low-income workers and reduced the maximum time for unemployment benefits from 26 to 20 weeks. The state also reduced the number of families eligible for food assistance and limited their time eligibility for cash assistance.

But Corey, of Michigan’s Children, said crippling a child’s potential for health and prosperity for short-term economic growth is counter-productive.

“Public policy should address the immediate social and economic environment of children – best public policies must address the whole child from cradle to career,” she said.

The league said more than half of public school students qualify for free or reduced price lunches because their households have incomes less than \$11,000 a year for a family of four.

Zehnder-Merrell said, “The findings show that children across Michigan are still suffering the fallout from our long recession.”

Frank Vandervort, a child advocacy law professor at the University of Michigan said there is increased stress on families with inadequate resources to meet the basic needs of their children.

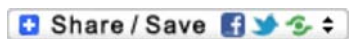
Even so, he continued, “Thousands of Michigan’s children are living at or near poverty, and too many are living in a desperate level of poverty, yet only a small minority of these children are abused or neglected.

“Most parents who are poor work very hard to see that their children’s needs are met,” he said, adding that alleviating poverty can reduce but not eliminate child abuse and neglect.”

Zehnder-Merrell said, “Poverty in Michigan is as big a threat to our children today as polio was to previous

generation. Fortunately, we can do something about this — we know that public policy can improve children's social and economic environment.”

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