


After Nassar scandal, time to make Michigan's abuse reporting laws work

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One in 4 Michigan children today is born into poverty. (Photo: Rick Nease/Detroit Free Press)

In the wake of the Larry Nassar scandal, institutions will continue to grapple with their inaction in the face of years of testimony from his victims.

Perpetrators of child abuse are everywhere in Michigan. They live and work in every neighborhood, in every zip code. They are people you know and trust. But chances are, if our current priorities continue, authorities won't catch abusers — and their patterns of abuse will continue.

After the Nassar scandal, we should be asking, what more can we do, as a state, to prevent the physical and sexual abuse of children in the future?

Blythe Tyler (Photo: Blythe Tyler)

And we should start with the state laws that that dictate who is required to report suspicions of abuse.

Darkness To Light, a nonprofit organization that tracks such data, reports that 62% of children who are abused never disclose or report that abuse. Sadly, they will never say anything to anyone. In Oakland County alone, we estimate 30,000 children will become victims of sexual abuse before they turn 18.

Michigan's relatively weak reporting laws don't help. There are requirements for teachers, health care professionals, and others in our community. But there are no requirements to educate these “mandated reporters” and teach them how to recognize and report potential abuse.

The guidelines for reporting suspected abuse are very simple to follow, and mandated reporters tend to understand them easily, but only after they receive training. Otherwise, misconceptions abound — for example, there does not have to be a visible bruise to raise concern.

A report can be prompted by something as simple as observing something you think is inappropriate, then reporting it — online or on the phone — to the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services.

Having mandated reporters is vital, but it isn't enough. They must be trained or they won't be able to fulfill their mandated duties, and the mandate to report all suspicions of abuse remains underfunded.

Even after the Nassar scandal, there has not been any effort from communities, or elected representatives, to demand a training requirement. It simply has not been seen as a priority.

The fiasco at MSU showed us how powerful a single voice is to bring down a serial abuser like Nassar. Other voices follow once one has gained prominence. On a local level, in a family or a school, the same thing happens - once mandated reporters understand how to meet their obligations.

Mandated reporter training should take place across Michigan. Children should also receive training to learn how to protect themselves, starting as early as preschool — the average age for a child victim of abuse is nine years old.

Mandated reporters have a moral and ethical obligation to be the voice for kids. They can reduce fear and remove obstacles. When someone reports, because they fully understand when and how to do it, a child can get the support they need and move forward toward a healthy and happy life.

Blythe Tyler is CEO of CARE House of Oakland County.

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