Metro
Mayor Bottoms convenes committee to advise reopening

Voices
The Rev. Jamal Bryant: ‘Even if church has stopped, ministry doesn’t’

Area social workers suspect reductions in child abuse due to underreporting

Families sue senior facility for negligence, wrongful deaths
Alone & Unprotected

Social workers: COVID-19 pandemic causes underreporting of child abuse around Metro Atlanta

BY MICHAEL FANNING  |  Contributor

As a result of shelter-in-place and social distancing conditions imposed on citizens to combat the spread of coronavirus throughout the state of Georgia, the number of child abuse reports has decreased, Georgia Gov. Brian P. Kemp said. Kemp and members of his coronavirus advisory committee announced these findings during a press conference in early April.

But while a reduction in reports of child abuse would normally be considered a positive outcome, there is concern by social workers in the region that the findings reported by Kemp and others are instead a result of gross underreporting.

Instead, they argued, the reduction in the frequency of reports is due to a number of imposed restrictions that prevent social services professionals and mandated reporters to adequately meet with children they would typically be able to observe when schools are open.

According to the Georgia Department of Education, education professionals, including teachers, principals, and school counselors, are the most common reporters of child abuse, making up nearly 60 percent of all child abuse cases in the state.

One of the reasons why, besides the fact that they spend at least eight hours a day with children, is that the State of Georgia classifies education professionals as mandated reporters, which by definition requires them to observe, notice and report cases of child abuse.

The State also considers employees and volunteers of any organization that provides care, treatment, education, training, supervision, coaching, counseling, recreational programs, or shelter to children, as mandated reporters. This includes organizations like the YMCA, The Boys Scouts of America, Girl Scouts of America, and even hotels.

But because shelter-in-place ordinations prevent children from attending after school programs or visiting community centers, many of these organizations now have limited or only emergency access to children, which prevents them from catching and reporting many instances of child abuse or neglect.

The ordinances have also resulted in protocol changes for social workers from Child Protective Services, a division of the Department of Family and Children’s Services — changes that prevent case managers from investigating instances of abuse or neglect, which could save a child’s life.

See ABUSE on page 6
Continued from page 2

According to a Dekalb County case manager who asked to not be identified, since the spread of the virus, CPS case managers are only visiting with children face-to-face as first responders, and all other case managers, including foster, independent living program (ILP), primarily meet with their wards virtually via FaceTime, Zoom, or other forms of video communication.

The managers only execute face-to-face visits if there is an emergency, the case manager explained.

“We are taking every step and precaution to protect ourselves and the children in care,” the case manager said. “When we are video conferencing we visit with the kids alone, interview them, see their rooms, and assess their overall well-being.

“If we determine or see something wrong a face to face visit takes place and further steps. The safety of children is still our number one concern,” the case manager continued. “Now, due to coronavirus, when we go out we ensure safety by wearing face masks, gloves, and social distancing when possible. However, some interaction is unavoidable. It’s a part of the job.”

Other social service providers agreed that school closures have exacerbated the virus’s impact on child abuse.

Maurice Ravennah, a child care professional and CEO of Phoenix International, Inc., an independent living program (ILP) that transitions foster care youth to adulthood, said that area schools are responsible for so much more than simply reporting instances of child abuse.

“Child abuse is definitely on the rise,” Ravennah said. “The ramifications of COVID-19 are felt just on the economy; it’s the actual family structure and dichotomy.

“For so many kids school isn’t just a place they’re educated, it’s a protector, babysitter, and even just a place to get two steady meals a day during the week,” he continued.

Phoenix International is a contracted provider authorized by DFCS to assist with the aforementioned transitioning of children who are out of care. They have worked for the department for nearly three years and currently serve, and house, nearly twenty youths ages 17 to 23 years of age.

Ravennah, who possesses nearly four years of experience in social work, explained further that parental stress, brought on by current conditions, would also contribute to an increase in child abuse.

“What we are seeing is that now that (kids) are home with their parents during all of this, there’s a higher chance of them being disciplined more and harsher because their parents are overwhelmed or become impatient,” he said.

Another issue that social workers took concern with is the issue of malnutrition.

Fortunately, area school systems like Atlanta Public Schools, Fulton County Schools and DeKalb County Schools have waivers from the Department of Agriculture to provide free lunches for closed schools.

The counties affected by school closures have quickly organized programs with the City of Atlanta and other municipalities to distribute lunches, canned food items, and some perishable items like cheese, lunch meat, and even chicken.

There are currently 21 locations throughout Fulton County alone, to assist with this endeavor. Additionally, Atlanta Public schools have amended their program to offer food weekly instead of three times a week.

In the absence of school systems and youth-related organizations, professionals and officials are asking individuals to be hypervigilant of any signs of child abuse, even if they’re someone who has minimal access to other people’s children, such as a neighbor or a grocery store worker.

“We all need to deputize ourselves, in the sense of acting like mandated reporters,” said Lamont Motley, a program director for Phoenix International Inc. “We really are all in this together, as a community let’s do our part. So if you see something, say something.”

If you suspect or know of a child being abused, please contact the Department of Family and Children Services at 1.855.GACHILD (+1 855-422-4453).

WHITE HOUSE

Moving past ‘invisible enemy,’ Trump nudges nation to reopen

BY ZEKE MILLER

Associated Press

For weeks, the Trump administration played up the dangers of the coronavirus as it sought to convince Americans to disrupt their lives and stay home.

Now, as President Donald Trump aims for a swift nationwide reopening, he faces a new challenge: convincing people it’s safe to come out and resume their normal lives.

It’s a defining question for a cloistered nation — and a political imperative for Trump, whose re-election likely rides on the pace of an economic rebound.

Can the country move beyond a crippling fear of the virus and return to something like its old routines, doing what’s possible to mitigate the risk of COVID-19, but acknowledging it may be a fact of life for years to come?

“We need to create the kind of confidence in America that makes it so that everybody goes back to work,” said Kevin Hassett, a White House adviser and former chair of the Council of Economic Advisers. “And that confidence is going to require testing and confidence that your workplace is a healthy place, but also confidence in the economy.”

At the White House, officials believe they’ve entered a new chapter of the pandemic response, moving from crisis mode to sustained mitigation and management.

It began last Thursday with the release of guidelines to governors for how to safely reopen their states. Trump and Vice President Mike Pence celebrated Americans for successfully “flattening the curve” of the epidemic.

A day later, a phalanx of the administration’s top medical officials sought to reassure the nation that there were plenty of tests available to safely begin easing restrictions.

Governors have been lifting restrictions each day since then, including aggressive moves announced Wednesday in Montana and Oklahoma. The Montana governor gave schools the green light to open their doors in early May, and Oklahoma will allow salons, barber shops, spas, and pet groomers to reopen Friday.


The governors’ moves coincided with lingering bleak news around the country. The death toll in Massachusetts eclipsed 2,000 on Wednesday, doubling from just a week earlier. About 16,000 people remained hospitalized across New York. A meat plant in Iowa that is vital to the nation’s pork supply is the latest slaughterhouse to shut down because of the outbreak. With the economy in for a long, brutal slump, Congress was on the verge of passing an almost $500 billion relief bill to bolster small businesses.

Trump flatly promised Americans that there will no repeat of the national lockdown. “We will not go through what we went through for the last two months,” he said.

It’s a sharp shift in rhetoric after Trump and allies stressed the threat of an “invisible enemy” to persuade people to abide by social distancing recommendations. The American people have also been scarred by the daunting death toll and images of body bags piled up in refrigerated trailers.

Moving from fear to acceptance will take confidence in government, medical professionals, and business at a time when faith in those institutions is low. White House aides say restoring confidence will require the same “whole-of-America” approach that slowed the virus spread.

“There’s one thing for the government to say, ‘OK, it’s safe to go out,’” New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat, said Tuesday. “If people don’t believe it’s safe, they’re not going to go.”

While there have been isolated protests in states aimed at lifting aggressive stay-at-home measures, most Americans don’t believe it will be safe to ease the restrictions any time soon, according to a new survey from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Trump predicted earlier this month that the economy would take off like a “rocket ship once we get back to business.” But experts say the recovery will be far slower.

“IT’ll be a very gradual process regardless of what a governor says or the president says,” said Dr. Robert Blendon, a Harvard professor of health policy and political analysis. He said the history of lockdowns, particularly the quarantine of more than 25,000 people around Toronto in 2003 to slow the spread of SARS, shows that it will take weeks, even months, for people to develop the confidence to resume normal activity.

Blendon also warned that a predicted second wave of COVID-19 could reverse any gains made in the interim.

It’s not just government, but individual businesses that will need to convince employees and consumers that it’s safe to return, once they decide to reopen.