



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

June 24, 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 United States. Efforts to contain the coronavirus are vital to the health of the 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 percent are known to the child.¹ Since the onset of the pandemic, the risk of abuse in the home and online is increasing significantly.

In our call to end sexual violence against children, adolescents, and women, we acknowledge that violence has been fueled for centuries by poverty, racism, and systematic disenfranchisement that vulnerable populations face. Through our work to prevent violence against children, we commit to addressing the longstanding structural barriers that Black and Indigenous communities face in accessing a variety of critical services focused on prevention, healing, and justice to end child sexual

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

violence. We are mindful that child protection services have also contributed to institutional racism and have often excluded the voices and leadership of people of color. Moving forward, we will self-reflect, listen, and elevate the voices of diverse leaders in the movement to ensure that our collective efforts serve all children, families, and communities.

Additionally, 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 and other at-risk populations. Our hope is that this letter calls 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 violence, including abuse and exploitation.

Many children are now hidden from the 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 and services that schools provide.² Moreover, many states have furloughed child protective service workers and have failed to provide personal protective equipment to ensure our child welfare professionals can be in contact with at-risk children and youth.

With the onset of stay-at-home orders in response to the pandemic in March 2020, states are reporting a significant decrease in child abuse reporting as compared to last year³ At the same time, there is an increase of reported abuse-related childhood injuries requiring hospitalization.^{4 5} There is also an increase in reports by children themselves to hotlines.⁶ **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.⁷ 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.

²<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/09/nyregion/coronavirus-nyc-child-abuse.html?rref=collection%2Fissuecollection%2Ftodays-new-york-times&action=click&contentCollection=todayspaper®ion=rank&module=package&version=highlights&contentPlacement=2&pgtype=collection>

³<https://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/coronavirus/calls-to-pa-child-safety-line-down-60-worrying-advocates/2388769/?fbclid=IwAR00AyygMUfEPN-vC7SQ-FzrClfxPC1v5aOdhLo0Qzw5CldOpztFcpNJJ04>

⁴<https://dfw.cbslocal.com/2020/03/20/texas-hospital-spike-severe-child-abuse-cases-coronavirus/>

⁵https://foxsanantonio.com/news/nation-world/with-no-school-calls-drop-but-child-abuse-hasnt-amid-virus-04-18-2020?fbclid=IwAR0GKltJSxCy7QbeVjC0a08JJPdyZhv6YUAcQlxt9Z_3qGOTmFos1u6TGHQ

⁶https://www.rainn.org/news/first-time-ever-minors-make-half-visitors-national-sexual-assault-hotline?fbclid=IwAR2kzDtVQBzN1Yo0qVYMcYHYwQs7Pp6M_jdiuitUKIG7xrXvbWTV718lxIQ

⁷<https://www.forbes.com/sites/thomasbrewster/2020/04/24/child-exploitation-complaints-rise-106-to-hit-2-million-in-just-one-month-is-covid-19-to-blame/#37b874f74c9c>

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 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.

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 community-based, trauma-informed, multidisciplinary, and culturally sensitive care and services that help abused children heal and seek justice.

Given the severity of the issues presented, **we call on Congress to invest significant resources, including at least \$300 million in emergency funding to strengthen child safety and protection programs in the next COVID-19 Relief Package.** We also support efforts to repurpose existing funding to ensure effective, community-based, and culturally sensitive prevention and response services focused on child safety. Finally, 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.

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 play a critical role in preventing, detecting, and combating child sexual abuse and exploitation online.

These programs are needed now more than ever, therefore 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.

In the wake of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, we call on you to urgently:

Ensure access to critical prevention and response services:

- Expand funding to ensure continuity of essential health and social welfare services, including mental health and psychosocial support, especially to the most vulnerable children—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 any form of trauma, including 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, community 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.

Ensure children are safe online:

- Expand funding for underserved 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 public safety programs to prevent, detect, and end on-line child sexual abuse material.
- 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. Peer-to-peer and parental education programs are urgently needed.
- Require states that receive funding to implement 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 private sector technology and communications companies to increase detection and take action to stop harmful activity against children online, including “grooming” of vulnerable children by predators and the creation and distribution of child sexual abuse images and videos.

Ensure rapid awareness of the COVID-19-related crisis for children, and expand access to support services for the most vulnerable:

- 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 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.

- Expand funding for resources that support people concerned about their thoughts or behaviors and are 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 a serious crisis for children at home and underserved 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.

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