

Siders child abuse case shows why Ohio advocacy network must be supported



Your Turn

Danielle McCament
Guest columnist

Investigators in June allegedly found 16 children trapped in “deplorable conditions” inside a home in Vinton County.

Two children needed to be airlifted to higher-level trauma centers, and seven others required hospital stays. The children’s parents and grandparents – Elizabeth and Gary L. Siders Jr. and Christina and Gary L. Siders Sr. – are currently facing charges of child endangerment.

This house-of-horrors case is just one of the tens of thousands of child abuse cases that unfold in Ohio each year.

These victims of child abuse depend on a network of services that help them heal and hold their abusers accountable in court. But funding for these services could soon collapse unless Congress passes the Crime Victims Fund Stabilization Act.

The bipartisan measure would replenish funding at no cost to taxpayers.

Advocacy network must be supported

It’s thanks to federal funding that Ohio has been able to build an effective support network of Children’s Advocacy Centers, which employ multidisciplinary teams of professionals trained to support victims and their families throughout every stage of the recovery process.

Children’s Advocacy Centers also help collect evidence, coordinate with prosecutors and streamline the investigation process to bring abusers to justice.

For young victims of child abuse, explaining the horrific experiences they’ve undergone can be especially difficult.

That’s why the centers’ specially trained providers conduct forensic interviews that can produce evidence that will hold up in court without retraumatizing the abused children. Last year, of the 2,300 cases Ohio centers referred to prosecution, more than 250 resulted in convictions and roughly 400 in pleas.

There are currently 36 Children’s Advocacy Centers across Ohio. Collectively, they provided medical care, counseling and victim advocacy services to almost 12,000 children and their families last year.

These facilities help relieve pressure on Ohio’s child protective services system, which is stretched

thin as is.

The Vinton County case alone has pushed the Department of Children and Youth to request \$1 million in additional state funding to cope with the “child protection crisis.”

Investing in these centers saves money in the long run.

The Health Policy Institute of Ohio estimates that “adverse childhood experiences,” such as abuse and neglect, contribute to more than \$10 billion in annual health care and related spending. That’s not including the other substantial costs to the state child protection, behavioral health, criminal justice and education systems.

Children’s Advocacy Centers save an average of \$1,000 in investigatory costs per child. One study showed that \$100,000 dedicated to a center’s programs can generate more than \$6.5 million in societal benefits, largely as a result of reduced crime and lower long-term health spending.

Much of the funding for Children’s Advocacy Centers comes from the Crime Victims Fund, which draws on fines paid by individuals convicted of federal crimes. The fund held \$13 billion in assets in 2017. But that total had plunged to just more than \$2 billion by 2024.

There’s a simple solution that could shore up funding for Ohio’s Children’s Advocacy Centers.

The Crime Victims Fund Stabilization Act would direct fines that fraudsters currently pay to the federal government into the Crime Victims Fund after the government and whistleblowers have been fully paid. In other words, the bill wouldn’t require any new burdens on taxpayers.

It has immense bipartisan support. In fact, it’s so unobjectionable that the House of Representatives already passed it without opposition. And it currently has 31 co-sponsors in the Senate, nearly evenly split between Democrats and Republicans.

But time is running out for the Senate to act. Without a more reliable source of funding, Children’s Advocacy Centers in Ohio and across the country could be forced to make difficult decisions about the services they provide to victims and families.

The Senate should pass the Crime Victims Fund Stabilization Act before the end of the year. Doing so would help ensure that thousands of young Ohioans can continue to receive the support they need to recover from abuse and help bring their abusers to justice.

Danielle McCament is the chief executive officer of the Ohio Network of Children’s Advocacy Centers.