

Superior Child Abuse Prevention Council

A Michigan Children's Trust Fund Organization
Serving Houghton, Baraga and Keweenaw Counties

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For more information

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Forums to “Turn the Light on Prevention” of child abuse, neglect

HOUGHTON – Parents, community leaders and area residents are invited to take part in three community forums over the next few weeks designed to “Turn the Light on Prevention” of child abuse and neglect.

The local forums are part of “Child Abuse Prevention Month” activities across the state. The forums, which will take place from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. each night, are set for April 22 at the B-H-K Child Development Center in Houghton, April 29 at the L’Anse Cafetorium and May 4 at the C-L-K Elementary School Library.

“Learning how to prevent child abuse and neglect is something that the whole community should embrace,” said Margaret Sottile, chairperson of the Superior Child Abuse Prevention Council, which is organizing the forums. “Unlike many other problems in the world, child abuse and neglect is 100 percent preventable, but it truly does take a community to get things done.”

Every year, nearly 30,000 Michigan children are victims of abuse or neglect, according to statistics from the Family Independence Agency. Those numbers include nearly 100 children in Baraga, Houghton and Keweenaw counties who are confirmed victims of abuse or neglect.

“Many people think small, rural communities are immune to abuse and neglect, but that is just not true,” Sottile said. “The stressors that can lead to abuse or neglect – single parenting, low incomes, two-parent working families, and so forth – are present across society.”

Abuse takes many forms, including physical, social, emotional and sexual, and its effects on a child can last a lifetime. Children who are physically abused, for example, are more likely to commit violent crimes and serve jail time, according to the FIA.

Neglect can be equally devastating, said Rick Holmstrom, a local social worker who has worked as a case worker at the FIA and at the former Keweenaw Academy at Mount Horace Greeley.

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“At Keweenaw Academy, the kids would tell me the No. 1 reason they joined a gang was because there was no one home at night,” he said. “The gang became their family.”

In the Copper Country, factors such as rural isolation and long winters can create stress that leads to abuse and neglect, Holmstrom said. While it is critical for anyone to report potential child abuse or neglect to the local FIA, Holmstrom also recommends that neighbors and friends reach out to young parents who appear to be under stress and encourage them to develop a support system to prevent abuse or neglect before it occurs.

“I always tell people, ‘Don’t just report it, but make friends with people,’” he said. “Invite them over for coffee, reach out to them a little bit.”

Holmstrom added that preventing child abuse or neglect has many benefits in addition to the immediate health and welfare of children. For example, preventing abuse before it happens can help preserve families that otherwise might face court-ordered separation. In many cases, preserving families provides greater long-term stability for children than foster care.

Each of the three community forums will feature a panel of experts, ranging from social workers and counselors to early childhood professionals and court workers. In addition to prevention strategies, the panel will discuss the definitions of child abuse or neglect, state laws, reporting requirements and advocacy for children.

Childcare and refreshments will be provided at the forums. Persons interested in attending are asked to pre-register by calling 482-3663 or 1-800-236-5657 a few days prior to the event.

The forums are sponsored by the Michigan’s Children’s Trust Fund, Superior Child Abuse Prevention Council, B-H-K Child Development Board, Keweenaw Family Resource Center and Copper Country Mental Health Services.

On the Web: www.michigan.gov/fia