



COMMISSION TO ELIMINATE
CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT FATALITIES

DRAFT CECANF Final Report

Introduction

Two-year-old Ivan Merlos died at the hands of his 19-year-old mother in Los Angeles County. He was beaten in the stomach and died from massive internal bleeding. This last beating was not the first. On an earlier occasion, Ivan was brought to the hospital with a broken leg. A nurse suspected abuse and called the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and the police.

The broken leg was the fifth time DCFS was called to investigate the family. Each time, Los Angeles DCFS took no action—no services were offered to this family who clearly needed help—because DCFS lacked the evidence to substantiate a specific incident of neglect or violence. And then the toddler died.

Child protective services staff, medical personnel, and law enforcement officers all saw this child, and all failed to protect him. Imagine what Ivan's life might have been had these support systems offered services to his family or removed him to a safe placement.

Ivan died in 2003. If he had lived, he would have been 15 years old today. He would have been a teenager in high school. Maybe he would have played soccer or basketball. Like most teens, he would have begun dreaming of his future, possibly wanting to serve his community as a law enforcement officer or a teacher. But Ivan was failed by the systems that could have protected him. He had no future at all.

Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities Affect Us All

Ivan's death, and that of every child who dies from abuse or neglect, has a profound and devastating impact. Joseluis Morales, a child protective services (CPS) supervisor in Texas, told the Commission that a fatality "is enough to just drop you to your knees. It is stuff that will stick with you your whole life." Beyond the child's immediate family and community, the ripples of each life cut short extend to us all. Today, 12 years later, Ivan's family has an empty seat at the table. His classroom has an empty seat. His sports team is missing a player.

A 2012 study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)¹ found that the total lifetime cost for just one year of confirmed cases of child maltreatment (579,000 cases of physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, and neglect) is approximately \$124 billion. If a child dies from abuse or neglect, the death equates to a lifetime cost of about \$1.3 million per child,² money the child would have earned over a lifetime as a productive citizen if he or she had lived.

Despite these shocking figures, the monetary cost pales in comparison to the emotional cost to families, communities, and society as a whole. Every fatality takes an irreversible toll.

[Begin Sidebar]

“Every child abuse and neglect fatality represents an immeasurable loss to the family and to the community, and is devastating to my workers and every health care person, every family member involved. We mourn the death of each child, but I want to learn from those deaths. I think we have an obligation to learn from those deaths.”

-- Judge John Specia, Commissioner of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services.

[End Sidebar]

It's Time for a National Strategy for the 21st Century

In the years since Ivan died, thousands more children have died at the hands of those who were supposed to protect them. They have died from abuse—beatings and brain injuries—inflicted by their parents or caretakers. They have died from neglect, including starvation, inadequate medical care, unsafe co-sleeping, or drowning in the bathtub.

The media highlights the most egregious of these child fatalities in detail. The public is outraged, but people have no idea what to do with their anger. Few journalists present constructive options. Seeing no solutions, people simply turn away from the horrors. They don't want to think about what happens to these children.

As Commissioners tasked with studying this problem for the last two years, however, we have thought about these children every day. We have read the daily news reports, and they have fueled our commitment to learn all we can about this issue and to bring to light a better strategy to protect children. We have done so to honor the unfinished lives of children who died in the past and to prevent these tragedies in the future.

The federal government has had its eye on prevention of child abuse and neglect fatalities for some time. Previous commissions and reports brought the problem to the

¹ Fang, X., Brown, D. S., Florence, C. S., & Mercy, J. A. (2012). The economic burden of child maltreatment in the United States and implications for prevention. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 36(2), 156-165. Retrieved from <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0145213411003140>. Also see the CDC website at <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childmaltreatment/economiccost.html>.

² Ibid.

nation’s awareness and made specific recommendations. Some of these recommendations have been implemented, but the number of child maltreatment fatalities has not decreased. In fact, data submitted to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) between 2001 and 2010 show a slight *increase* in fatalities over the decade.

With the creation of the Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities (CECANF) in 2013,³ the President and Congress sent a galvanizing message: Build on the lessons and recommendations of the past, but create a new, comprehensive national strategy that will truly make a difference. We take this charge seriously. If these children belong to all of us—and we believe they do—we cannot desert them.

We began our work in 2014, crossing the country to hold public hearings in 14 jurisdictions. We heard from child welfare commissioners, researchers, and practitioners and experts in many fields, including CPS, medicine, and law enforcement. We met with leaders and staff in jurisdictions that have implemented various approaches aimed at reducing fatalities. We looked at what is currently working, and what is not.

In the process, we heard from a few communities that have come together in ways that appear to be reducing deaths from child abuse and neglect. These approaches are promising, but the Commission found no state or local response that included all elements we believe are necessary to achieve widespread, lasting results. Also lacking is a coordinated national response that reflects and responds to the urgency of our present crisis.

We have reached the conclusion that to succeed, we need both an urgent, immediate response and a comprehensive, long-term national strategy. In both cases, we need to reach beyond CPS agencies alone for solutions, effectively marshaling the knowledge, skills, and resources of all government and community agencies that come into contact with families who have young children. We need public will and state and federal leadership to bring these solutions to life.

In short, it is time to move away from old patterns and adopt a new course of action to prevent child maltreatment deaths. In the following pages, we will outline that new course of action, beginning with a short list of **five recommendations that the**

Our Charge

CECANF reports directly to the President and Congress on the following issues:

- The use of federally funded CPS and child welfare services to reduce fatalities from child abuse and neglect.
- The effectiveness of the services funded by the federal government
- Best practices in preventing child and youth fatalities
- The effectiveness of federal, state, and local policies and systems aimed at collecting accurate, uniform data on child fatalities
- Barriers to preventing fatalities
- Trends in demographic and other risk factors that are predictive of or correlated with child maltreatment
- Methods of prioritizing child abuse and neglect prevention for families with the highest need
- Methods of improving data collection and utilization

³ See Appendix for the full text of the Protect Our Kids Act.

Commission believes must be implemented right away, to answer the 911 call on behalf of children in danger right now and to prevent the deaths of many of the thousands of children who will die this year if we fail to act.

These steps will reduce the number of deaths, but they alone won't be enough to get us to our goal of zero fatalities. So in later chapters, we describe the components of a broader national strategy for a 21st-century child welfare system that coordinates a stronger, more integrated response across states and communities. This comprehensive approach will give us the tools and resources needed to identify and respond to children and families much earlier, before they reach a crisis.

Combining these two approaches—at the same time—will be the glue that holds our recommendations together. This work reflects a national emergency. We are ready to respond.