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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

ASSISTANT WHIP

COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONSUMER PROTECTION & COMMERCE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ENERGY

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT & CLIMATE CHANGE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH

April 17, 2020

The Honorable Alex M. Azar II
Secretary of Health and Social Services
Office of the Secretary
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Azar:

As we've worked to contain the spread of COVID-19, many Americans have been forced into their homes to avoid contracting or spreading the virus. Stay-at-home and shelter-in-place orders have unintended and sometimes incredibly dangerous consequences for our youth. Social distancing has all at once driven Americans home while separating children from typical support networks and away from interaction with mandatory reporters and systems designed to protect them.

Child Abuse Hotlines across the country have seen significant decreases in the amount of calls they have been receiving. In Delaware, annual calls into the child abuse hotline typically reach above 21,000 calls. Following the closure of schools -- one of the top three reporters of child abuse -- a steep decline in reports occurred. This poses significant challenges for us as we rely heavily on their interaction with at-risk children.

More specifically, Delaware has seen a 60% reduction in reports in April alone. That is only a point-in-time comparison, but it tracks with larger trends we have seen across the country. Reports in Arizona have seen, on average, an over 25% decrease in calls¹. And in Montana, the number of calls to the hotline have decreased by 45%².

The troubling reality is that this decline does not translate to fewer incidents of abuse, it most likely means abuse is going unreported and children are not getting the intervention they would otherwise receive. We know that with increased financial, medical, and mental stress facing families, as well as the disruption in typical routines, children are at greater risk of abuse. And, as we continue fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation may worsen as routines are further disrupted.

¹ Dowd, Bridget. 2020 *Arizona Department of Child Safety: With School Closed Calls to Child Abuse Hotline Have Decreased*. April 14, 2020. <https://kjzz.org/content/1527601/airzona-department-child-safety-schools-closed-calls-child-abuse-hotline-have>.

² 2020. *AP News*. April 06. Accessed April 14, 2020. <https://apnews.com/0700468782bd54122b79944a600f9e2c>

The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) funding Delaware receives is an incredibly powerful tool for the state, but the FY20 CAPTA funding level simply cannot provide enough resources to serve the population of children who really need it. Currently, each child who needs support has an additional \$1.18 the state can use for them. This is insufficient to provide meaningful support and intervention as the case may require.

In light of these concerns, we urge you to consider and reevaluate how we address and prevent child abuse, not only as Americans are social distancing but also as students are in remote learning environments and have additional time to spend on the internet. We know children are at risk of trafficking and grooming while surfing the web unprotected and unsupervised. While it's critical that we ensure direct protection of our children, we must also provide educators and our school systems the tools and best practices they need to keep their students and employees safe.

Increasing funding to the CAPTA programs will go a long way to address these concerns. Many of us in Congress will continue to support these programs. However, it is important that your Department and the Administration on Children and Families (ACF) provide an accounting of additional resources needed to meaningfully address child abuse in Delaware and across the United States. I urge you to provide the House and Senate appropriations committees with a supplemental funding request to adequately fund ACF's CAPTA programs during these times of distress.

1. **Increased funding** to support the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act Discretionary Funds Program. These grants can help State and local agencies develop and provide additional evidence-based training programs as well as technical assistance to grantees.
2. **Increased funding** to support the Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention Grants (CBCAP). These funds will help increase coordination of community-based programs and efforts to prevent and address child abuse.
3. **Fund research** to determine how we can better protect our children in digital environments, whether they're surfing the web, or using remote learning.

However, increasing funding to CAPTA programs is only part of the solution. The Department must account for the changing landscape of education and the environment Americans are living in while fighting the COVID-19 virus. To better allocate funds during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, we request answers to the following:

1. How are funds in the programs above already being used? Are there best practices that have been identified?
2. How do the aforementioned programs interact with one another? Do they supplement each other?
3. What guidance has been provided to State and local agencies who are dealing with remote learning environments?

It is our collective responsibility to do everything in our power to prevent child abuse of any kind. We must take meaningful steps toward increased support services, enhanced training capacities, and increased investment in comprehensive and collaborative strategies not only to reduce incidents of child abuse but also to ensure children have adequate support to heal from abuse they've experienced.

Thank you for considering the unique challenges our children face due to the COVID-19 outbreak. We appreciate your leadership during these trying times and stand ready to assist in the continued response efforts.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Lisa Blunt Rochester". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Lisa" being the most prominent.

LISA BLUNT ROCHESTER
Member of Congress