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**TESTIMONY OF TERESA HUIZAR,  
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*for the*

**COMMISSION TO ELIMINATE CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT FATALITIES  
(CECANF)**

**July 24, 2014**

Chairman Sanders and Members of the Commission:

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Commission on the important issue of child abuse fatalities in the US. As the Executive Director of National Children's Alliance, the national association and accrediting body for almost 800 Children's Advocacy Centers in the US serving more than 294,000 abused children last year,<sup>1</sup> I know too well the tragedy of children killed by their caretakers and the toll this takes on communities, their remaining siblings and extended family members, and the multidisciplinary teams who must investigate these sad cases.

Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs) are child-friendly facilities in which multidisciplinary teams of law enforcement, child protective services, prosecutors, medical professionals, mental healthcare providers, and victim advocates coordinate their efforts to investigate and treat child abuse while holding offenders accountable.<sup>2</sup> In the case of child abuse fatalities, our CACs are often used for the interviews conducted with other child witnesses and siblings. I have personally observed the interviews of small children who watched as their sister was purposely thrown out of a multi-story apartment window to her death. And, I have held the hand of the tearful, tough, and experienced detective who left the side of that broken little 2 year-old body to come to the CAC to interview the siblings and was undone at the prospect. Child abuse fatalities are heartbreaking in every way: the loss and waste of a precious young life; the profound and traumatic grief of siblings, grandparents, and extended family members; the loss of innocence of a community that thought children were protected; and the secondary trauma suffered by the child abuse professionals who intervene.

Recognizing that these tragic deaths are preventable, the National Coalition to End Child Abuse Deaths<sup>3</sup>, of which National Children's Alliance is a member, has been working since 2010 to raise awareness of the problem and to encourage bipartisan policy solutions.

### **Child Abuse Fatalities in the US**

As you are know, approximately 80% of children who die from maltreatment are 3 years old or younger, and more than half are infants.<sup>4</sup> We also know that our numbers do not capture either the scope of the problem or the scope of the suffering. Indeed, the 2011 GAO report indicated that the NCANDS data, due to the voluntary nature of the data collection and the fact that in many states, only one data source is used for the reporting, substantially undercounts fatal child abuse and estimates that roughly 2,500 children are fatally abused

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<sup>1</sup> 2013 National Children's Alliance National Statistics

<sup>2</sup> For more information about CACs visit [www.nationachildrensalliance.org](http://www.nationachildrensalliance.org)

<sup>3</sup> The National Coalition to End Child Abuse Deaths is comprised of member organizations: Every Child Matters, the National Association of Social Workers, the National District Attorneys Association, the National Children's Alliance, and the National Center for the Review and Prevention of Child Deaths.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

each year.<sup>5</sup> Of those fatally abused, at least 14% were previously known to child welfare agencies or in their care.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, restrictive confidentiality laws make it difficult to thoroughly examine abuse fatalities when they occur so that we can learn how to prevent them and what risk factors are most associated with them. Recent rules promulgated by HHS to clarify the *Child Abuse Prevention Treatment Act* (CAPTA) confidentiality requirements were marginally helpful. While making clear that States may provide information necessary so that child death review teams and policymakers can examine the particular child welfare case in which the child died, it did not indicate that information on past child welfare reports or investigations involving the same child or siblings could likewise be provided.

And, as important as it is to learn all we can from individual cases, we are in desperate need of real, meaningful aggregate data. As the GAO concluded in their 2011 report “Child Fatalities From Maltreatment: National Data Could Be Strengthened,” weaknesses in our current NCANDS data collection effort include:

- Roughly half of all States reporting through NCANDS do not use multiple data sources—such as death certificates, state child welfare agency records, or law enforcement reports—in collating their reports for submission;
- Inconsistent State definitions of maltreatment, differing State legal standards for substantiating maltreatment, and missing State data complicate reporting these deaths through NCANDS, and thus our understanding of the scope of the problem;
- And, that additional demographic, family composition, and risk factor information has been collected by NCANDS but as yet is unreported to policymakers and the public in the annual HHS annual publication of Child Maltreatment. (Administration officials now plan to release this information in the 2013 report, which we welcome.)

In short, I am excited the Commission is tasked with developing a comprehensive national strategy to combat the tragedy of child abuse fatalities. Rather than a piecemeal approach to preventing these deaths, children at risk of imminent harm need and require the government’s protection. Fatal child abuse is preventable. And as a public health problem, can be approached in a thoughtful and analytical manner, much as the US has successfully combated other public health threats.

I am encouraged by the actions already taken by the Commission because, in many ways, opening a national conversation on child abuse fatalities through CECANF mirrors and strengthens the process by which States review child deaths to strengthen their own prevention efforts. In 1996, Congress reauthorized CAPTA, and in its reauthorization, included issues related to fatal maltreatment through public disclosures of the existence of child maltreatment fatalities and the establishment of Citizen Review Panels to review and

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<sup>5</sup> US Government Accountability Office, “Child Fatalities From Maltreatment: National Data Could Be Strengthened”, July 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

make recommendations for improvement in child fatalities, foster care, and intervention.<sup>7</sup> In some states these CRPs also serve as Child Death Review teams. Since that time, the Children's Bureau within HHS has supported the development and continuance of Child Death Review, and now all States conduct Child Death Review in some capacity.<sup>8</sup> For a decade, the Maternal and Child Health Bureau has funded the National Center for the Review and Prevention of Child Deaths. The resource center provides training and technical support to all states to help establish and improve the review process, and manages a national Child Death Review Case Reporting System. While an invaluable resource to Child Death Review teams within States, the resources allocated to the National Center for Review and Prevention of Child Deaths are minimal and State participation in the Child Death Review Case Reporting system is voluntary. Undoubtedly, more resources are needed to improve child death review within States, with a special emphasis on child abuse fatalities.

Reducing child abuse fatalities, particularly those involving prior contact with the child welfare system, is a complex matter. Thus, I encourage the Commission to investigate and address issues such as:

- Building upon the best of current child protection systems and evidence-supported prevention and intervention efforts, to develop a national strategy to end maltreatment deaths, including public health and social services aimed at strengthening families and preventing maltreatment in the first place;
- Workforce training, caseload, and risk assessment practice within child protective services so that at-risk children may be identified to prevent fatal or near-fatal risk of harm;
- Better protect children at risk of imminent harm by encouraging Children's Advocacy Centers to expand their services to include severe physical abuse and neglect cases so that the child abuse experts represented on their multidisciplinary team can ensure close coordination of criminal legal proceedings and civil child protection systems, as well as medical care and mental healthcare for child victims;
- Strengthening the medical examiner and coroner system within the US to ensure proper and accurate designations of cause of death in child abuse fatalities, which are often among the most medically complex;
- Providing training to law enforcement and prosecutors to thoroughly investigate and prosecute cases of fatal and near-fatal abuse in order to hold offenders accountable;
- Creating data-sharing systems that allow agencies to cross-share information about near-fatalities and fatalities so that children can be saved and research can inform our practice;

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<sup>7</sup> Covington, T. & Petit, M. "Chapter Five: the Prevention of Child Fatalities," *The Children's Bureau: Shaping a century of child welfare practices, programs, and policies.*, Children's Bureau, Department of Health and Human Services, Draft 2012.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

- Through tested public education campaigns, enabling the public to identify and report child abuse and neglect, thereby engaging communities in protecting their own children.<sup>9</sup>

**In Summary:**

Child abuse and neglect fatalities are preventable tragedies. And, our efforts on behalf of these children must go beyond finger-pointing, the blaming and firing of individual caseworkers, and scattered prevention and intervention strategies if we are to reform child protection systems in a way that prevents future deaths. A national strategy to end child abuse fatalities is critically needed in this country. And, our best hope of reaching a comprehensive strategy is through the work you are doing on CECANF to investigate, make thoughtful recommendations, and lift up promising evidence-supported practices. The lives of more than 1,500 children each year depend upon it.

Thank you for your consideration.

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<sup>9</sup> 12 We Can Do Better, "Child Abuse and Neglect Deaths in America", 3rd Edition, 2012.