

Pa. laws regarding child abuse should be changed in wake of Penn State scandal, advocates say

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HARRISBURG, Pa. — Child advocates called Monday for changes in state laws they say could have stopped the alleged child sex abuse by a former Penn State assistant football coach and would help protect other youngsters.

The advocates cited a range of problems in Pennsylvania laws they have been pushing for action on in recent months, some for years. The laws are designed to protect child victims — and in many cases have proved effective.

But speakers at a Capitol news conference said state law must be strengthened with respect to reporting suspected abuse to authorities.

"Really what happened at Penn State is happening to lots of kids everywhere," said Cathleen Palm, executive director of the Protect Our Children Committee.

Palm and others said that everyone who, by law, is required to report suspected child abuse, such as a teacher or medical professional, should be required to contact authorities, not just a superior.

They say the current practices can delay investigations and do not protect the victims' rights.

Also, the definition of who can be a perpetrator of child abuse — broadly speaking, someone who is responsible for the care of a child — is unclear, leaving it up to the counties to develop their own interpretation, Wolfe said.

In addition, they said ChildLine, where reports of child abuse are supposed to be called in, does not always pick up or respond. Counties need more resources to investigate and respond to reports of child abuse, and an independent ombudsman's office should be created to help ensure the system is working for victims.

Another key issue they raised is the question of how a case is categorized as child abuse.

They say social workers cannot protect a child or provide services in the home, such as family counseling, if county child welfare investigators cannot determine who abused the child.

That means that some children end up getting abused again, said Debra Schilling Wolfe of the University of Pennsylvania's Field Center for Children's Policy, Practice and Research.

"It's one of the narrowest state laws in the country," Wolfe said.

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Former assistant coach Jerry Sandusky is accused of abusing eight boys, some on campus, over 15 years. Questions have been raised about why it took years for witness accounts and police investigations to surface.

The scandal resulted in the ousting of school President Graham Spanier and longtime coach Joe Paterno, and has brought shame to one of college football's legendary programs. surface.

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