

Child advocates call for changes in Pa. laws

By Marc Levy, Associated Press

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HARRISBURG - Child advocates called for changes Monday in state laws that they say could have stopped the child sex abuse a former Pennsylvania State University assistant football coach is accused of committing 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 current practices can delay investigations and do not protect victims' rights. The Penn State case is unusual in that an adult says he witnessed an act of abuse, whereas most child abuse or sexual abuse cases are not witnessed by adults, they said.

A spokesman for Gov. Corbett said Monday the governor was listening to proposals to strengthen the state's laws and thought it was a good time to improve them but would not say what, if anything, he thought should be done.

Children's advocates also said ChildLine, a state hotline where reports of child abuse are supposed to be called in, does not always pick up or respond, extending some problems that otherwise could have been stopped.

"It's like the fire department: It can't be good most of the time," said Frank Cervone, executive director of the Philadelphia-based nonprofit organization Support Center for Child Advocates.