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Child Protection FAQ: ChildLine (PA's Child Abuse Reporting Hotline)

What is ChildLine?

ChildLine is the division of the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (DHS) mandated by state law to receive, record and refer reports of suspected child abuse and neglect (CAN). ChildLine must be available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to receive CAN reports.

ChildLine also receives and is responsible for referring General Protective Services (GPS) reports, which are non-abuse cases that still warrant an assessment of the child's well-being.

Law enforcement officials investigating a possible crime against a child or child welfare professionals responding to a report of CAN are able to immediately get information from ChildLine 24/7 as to whether the child (or a member of the child's household or family) was the subject of prior reports of CAN.

ChildLine staff search the statewide database sharing this information in real-time with law enforcement or children and youth agency staff. This information will prove critical to on-the-ground professionals so these professionals will know whether the report they are investigating is the first, second or sixth report involving the child or family.

Finally, ChildLine is responsible for processing all requests for a Pennsylvania Child Abuse History Clearance. This \$10 clearance is one of the background checks required for individuals to qualify to work or volunteer with children in Pennsylvania.

What happens after ChildLine receives a report?

Specially trained intake caseworkers and supervisors report to oral and electronic reports made by mandated reporters and the public.

Based on the information supplied by the person making the CAN report and review of state law, ChildLine caseworkers will take one of the following actions:

1. Notify the county children and youth agency when a report involves suspected CAN requiring a child abuse investigation by the county agency (either alone or jointly with law enforcement). These are known as Child Protective Services (CPS) reports.
2. Notify law enforcement if the report involves an alleged crime against a child, the report is "immediately" transmitted to the district attorney in the county where the incident is

alleged to have happened. These are known as law enforcement only (LEO) reports.

3. Notify the county children and youth agency of a report that is a non-abuse or General Protective Services (GPS) case for an assessment or other “appropriate action.”

In 2013, of the calls answered by ChildLine

- 18 percent were CPS reports;
- 28 percent involved GPS referrals; and
- 3.5 percent LEO reports

The chart included below illustrates the number of CPS, GPS and LEO reports recorded at ChildLine between 2006 and 2013. There has been recent attention to the increase in CPS reports handled at ChildLine over the last several years. However, the more striking numbers may prove to be the rising GPS and LEO reports handled by ChildLine.

Year	Child Protective Services (CPS)	General Protective Services (GPS)	Law Enforcement Only (LEO)
2013	26,944	41,386	5,233
2012	26,664	39,328	4,703
2011	26,215	38,780	3,885
2010	25,812	36,503	3,288
2009	25,792	33,293	2,948
2008	24,064	28,063	2,602
2007	22,673	22,443	1,708
2006	25,088	18,414	909

How many calls does ChildLine receive annually?

In 2014, ChildLine received 164,911 calls with 158,131 of those calls eventually being answered. Approximately 4 percent (n=6,780) of the calls received at ChildLine in 2014 were abandoned or deflected.

The Department of Human Services (DHS) defines an “abandoned call” as a call that “is terminated by the caller after the hotline phone rings and the caller is provided the complete hotline answering message and still

is waiting to be answered by a hotline worker. This includes callers waiting in the queue as a result of high call volume.” A “deflected call” is a call where the caller did not get into the queue “instead the caller gets a busy signal so they have to call back.”

YEAR	Total Calls Received	Total Calls Answered	# Calls Abandoned Deflected ¹	% of Calls Abandoned Deflected
2014	164,911	158,131	6,780	4.03
2013	148,204	142,084	6,120	4.06 ²
2012	145,794	138,541	7,253	4.95
2011	140,348	128,111	12,237	8.72
2010	133,660	121,868	11,792	8.82
2009	123,094	117,203	5,891	4.79
2008	121,369	117,305	4,064	3.35
2007	121,657	110,766	10,801	8.95
2006	105,737	98,514	7,223	6.83

How many Intake staff are employed at ChildLine?

ChildLine generally is expected to operate with 38 caseworkers and 6 supervisors. However, ChildLine routinely operates with fewer caseworkers than authorized as a result of staff turnover and extended vacancies.

For instance, last fall the hotline was operating with 36 caseworkers and 2 of these workers were in the 3-month training period. During this training period, caseworkers are

¹ A call is abandoned when the caller hangs up before they reach a caseworker, a deflected call occurs when a call is unable to be placed in the queue as all caseworkers are engaged in a call and all wait/hold slots are already filled as well. Up to 3 callers can be placed in the queue and will remain there until a caseworker picks up the call or 30 minutes have passed and the call is then terminated.

² February’s rate of abandoned and deflected calls exceeded 8 percent and in May the rate exceeded 6 percent. There appears to be a correlation between the times with the highest rate of A/D calls and times the hotline is operating with reduced staff (e.g., between January and May the hotline was operating with 5 vacancies due to 2 retirements, 2 workers leaving to work in a county assistance office and 1 transitioning to a supervisory position).

not able to answer hotline calls independently.

At the beginning of 2014, the hotline was down 5 staff. Indications are that ChildLine started 2015 with 6 caseworker vacancies.

In 2012, SEIU Local 668, which provides union representation to ChildLine intake caseworkers, offered recommendations to the Task Force on Child Protection that included hiring part-time caseworkers “immediately to help cover the weekends” and to “help fill the chronic staffing needs of ChildLine.” SEIU applauded enactment of legislation requiring that school employees be trained in recognizing and reporting child abuse, but also pleaded “give us the manpower to answer those calls.”

When the Task Force on Child Protection issued its [report in November 2012](#), it referenced that “ChildLine staffing levels and retention issues” required further examination. The Task Force also signaled support for the ChildLine workforce writing, “The Task Force applauds the level of care and commitment on the part of the employees who staff the ChildLine centralized reporting system.”

On February 3, 2015, the PA Department of Human Services informed ChildLine staff that the state intends to:

- Fill 6 ChildLine Caseworker positions and 4 Clerk Typist 3 positions that have been vacant;
- Post an additional 10 ChildLine caseworker positions and 10 Clerk Typist 3 positions;
- Request 10 temporary staff to assist in data entry and transmission;
- Identify a “maximum” of 9 DHS staff that will “temporarily lend a hand;” and

- Explore the “use of annuitants” to assist with hotline and clearance responsibilities

How is ChildLine funded?

Pennsylvania appropriates state general fund dollars to operate ChildLine.

PA’s Department of Human Services noted in its 2013 Annual Child Abuse Report that ChildLine expenditures related to receiving CAN reports totaled \$2.6 million. Another \$4.117 million was appropriated to support the processing of child abuse history clearances.³

Year	ChildLine Operations (CAN reports & Child Abuse History Clearances)
2013	\$6.717 million
2012	\$6.04 million
2011	\$6.08 million
2010	\$5.9 million
2009	\$5.48 million

Why did ChildLine move to receive reports and share information electronically?

State law previously required that ChildLine “immediately transmit orally” a report of suspected child abuse to the “appropriate county agency.” Through this oral transmission, the ChildLine intake caseworkers provided county children and youth agencies with details about the substance of the complaint. GPS referrals were also orally transmitted to the county children and youth agency.

This “oral” transmission requirement and practice proved impractical and troubling inviting opportunities for miscommunication and data sharing lapses.

³http://www.dhs.state.pa.us/cs/groups/webcontent/documents/report/c_086251.pdf

A further challenge was that LEO reports sent from ChildLine to the district attorney were not shared immediately. Instead these LEO reports, which involved a possible crime against a child, were mailed by regular mail.

At a September 2012 meeting of the Task Force on Child Protection one member raised concerns about this practice noting that in “acute sexual abuse cases” there may be a need for investigation and services for the child “immediately not a week from now or when the DA gets and can process the report.”

In the summer of 2012, SEIU 668 – Pennsylvania’s Social Services Union – offered a series of recommendations to the Task Force on Child Protection, including permitting the reports to be shared with counties either orally or electronically so as to “drastically reduce the time it takes to transmit these reports to the counties and free up several caseworkers each day to handle hotline calls.”

PA’s enacted FY 2014-2015 budget included \$5.784 million for “non-recurring development costs associated with the Child Welfare Information Solutions (CWIS).” This combined with \$4.085 million in federal funding for a total of \$9.869 for the initial development of CWIS.⁴

DHS’ Office of Children, Youth and Families (OCYF) has planned CWIS to include 4 phases with the 1st phase launched in December 2014. It took 6 years (and various even earlier IT disasters that cost significant public resources) to develop a statewide automated child welfare system. Among the CWIS goals:

- Improve the efficiency and effectiveness of PA’s child welfare programs through systematic

automation and process modernization;

- Integrate state level systems with county children and youth agencies own IT and case management services;
- Improve the timeliness of reporting and information sharing including between ChildLine and law enforcement; and
- Enable data driven decision making that will result in improved outcomes for children.

It is through CWIS that DHS will meet the mandate in Act 29 of 2014 to have a central database with information available in real-time to certain individuals in the course of investigating a possible crime against a child or assessing a family for GPS.

CWIS also provides the opportunity for mandated reporters to become a registered user of the ChildLine portal in order to submit child abuse reports electronically or to secure a Child Abuse History Clearance.

How many Child Abuse History Clearances are processed annually?

ChildLine is also how the Commonwealth assists employers and agencies relying on volunteers, which are now mandated by state law to more fully screen potential employees or volunteers, fulfill this obligation.

It is through the Child Abuse History Clearance, that it is determined if the potential employee or volunteer is listed in the state CAN database as a perpetrator of an indicated or founded report of CAN.

More than 600,000 Child Abuse History Clearances were processed by ChildLine’s Verification Unit in 2013. That was approximately 74,000 more clearances than were processed just five years earlier in 2009.

⁴http://www.dhs.state.pa.us/cs/groups/webcontent/documents/report/p_012081.pdf

PA law permits DHS to charge a \$10 fee to process the clearance application.

State law waives the \$10 fee for prospective volunteers with a Big Brother/Big Sister program, domestic violence or sexual violence program be waived. The \$10 fee is also not charged to persons participating in a work experience or job training program managed by DHS. In recent years approximately 3,000 clearance applications were submitted by prospective volunteers in a Big Brother/Sister Program and another nearly 700 volunteers applied intending to work in a domestic or rape crisis program.

The revenue generated by the child abuse history clearances are deposited into Pennsylvania's general fund.

Year	Child Abuse History Clearances Processed
2013	601,267 ⁵
2012	539,690 ⁶
2011	501,890 ⁷
2010	528,691 ⁸
2009	526,660 ⁹

⁵ According to DPW's 2013 Annual Child Abuse Report, "A total of 1,185 applicants less than one percent, were named as perpetrators in child abuse reports." 161 of the applicants were then "prohibited from hire."

⁶ According to DPW's 2012 Annual Child Abuse Report, "A total of 1,085 applicants, less than one percent, were named as perpetrators in child abuse reports. Of these perpetrators, 141 were identified as being prohibited from hire."

⁷ According to DPW's Annual Child Abuse Report for 2011, "A total of 1,051 applicants, less than one percent, were named as perpetrators in child abuse reports. Of these perpetrators, 96 were identified as being prohibited from hire."

⁸ According to DPW's Annual Child Abuse Report for 2010, "A total of 1,117 applicants, less than one percent, were named as perpetrators in child abuse reports. Of these perpetrators, 25 were identified as being prohibited from hire."

⁹ According to DPW's Annual Child Abuse Report for 2009, "A total of 1,234 applicants, less than one percent, were named as perpetrators in child abuse reports. Of these perpetrators, 20 were identified as being prohibited from hire."

Are the 2015 challenges being experienced by ChildLine new or do they reflect a trend?

In recent days the demands on ChildLine have been reported by the media. Increased call volumes, the frequency with which those reporting suspected CAN encounter long wait times, and overall confusion in the wake of the enactment of 20+ child protection laws in 2013-2014 has caused quite a stir.

*"It is outrageous and unacceptable that Pennsylvania has a child abuse hot line that routinely "misses" calls from people trying to report neglected, beaten or sexually abused children."*¹⁰

That was the lead in a York Daily Record editorial.

The editorial, however, wasn't published in 2015. Instead it was January 5, 2011.

Child advocates, responding to admissions of the Rendell Administration that ChildLine was experiencing a dropped or abandoned call rate of nearly 9 percent, wrote to legislative leaders in June 2010. The message was simple: "We urge you to review the procedures and staffing of ChildLine to ensure that this vital life line for abused and neglected children is able to effectively fulfill its duties."

Advocates outreached to policy makers throughout the remainder of 2010 raising enough awareness that Rendell officials flagged the operations of ChildLine in its transition report to then incoming Governor-elect Tom Corbett. This element of the transition report got the attention of the Associated Press and other media outlets as well.

¹⁰ http://www.ydr.com/ci_17014083

When child advocates called for the creation of a Task Force on Child Protection in April 2011 among the areas cited as in need of urgency – ChildLine.

Throughout 2011 and 2012, ChildLine would gain some space in the spotlight, but then it would fade away.

Included in the questions the Center for Children's Justice and its allies posed to the 2014 gubernatorial candidates: Will you initiate an independent audit of ChildLine in order to analyze the hotline's staffing trends (e.g., number of staff, turnover rates, use of overtime) and the recent implementation of modern technology?

It was at a time of transition and tough budget dynamics in PA that the York Daily Record wrote in January 2011:

"Where are our priorities in this state? Lawmakers and administration officials spend our tax dollars on thousands of questionable things, but they won't provide enough to properly fund a hot line that might save the lives of youngsters?"

Such a situation makes us wonder: If our government can't even get to all the child abuse tips, how effectively is it investigating the reports that do get through the hot line?"

And then the YDR concluded:

"He faces many issues and budget constraints, but this must be a top priority."

Leaders have changed, budget constraints remain, but hopefully priorities they are a changing.