

# Is Woonsocket RI's capital for child abuse?

City agency to meet with state officials over troubling statistics on child abuse

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WOONSOCKET – The state's top child welfare officials will join social workers and members of the clergy at St. James Episcopal Church tomorrow for a "community meeting" about the city's disproportionately high rates of child abuse and neglect.

The meeting is a joint venture of the state Department for Children, Youth and Families (DCYF) and Community Care Alliance, said Ben Lessing, director of the city-based CCA. DCYF Director Trista Piccola and State Child Advocate Jennifer Griffith are both attending.

"As you may know, Woonsocket has the highest rate of child abuse and neglect in the state and a significant number of children that are placed in foster care," said Lessing. "Local elected officials, clergy and other stakeholders have been invited to learn more about the issues facing families locally."

Lessing said he expects the discussion to touch on not only the number of children who return home after a stint in foster care, "but more importantly the number who don't return home." Lessing said he has been in talks with DCYF about developing early-intervention strategies to prevent children from entering foster care, and keeping them closer to home when they do.

"What happens when they get placed is they have to return to their home school," said Lessing. "It doesn't matter whether the placement is in Barrington or Warren or wherever, they have to come back to their home school district. Logistically it's a nightmare."

The longer children remain in foster care, Lessing says, the more difficult it is to transition them back to the homes from which they were removed – another issue that helped lead family advocates to set up the community meeting.

The session is something he and DCYF officials have been talking about for some time and Piccola's appearance at a community forum to discuss the issue is the first time he can remember a local visit from a child welfare director for such an occasion in many years.

According to Kids Count, a child advocacy research organization, the city had more incidents of child abuse and neglect per capita in 2016 than any other community in Rhode Island – 29.2 victims per 1,000 children. The statewide average was 12.3 victims per 1,000 children.

Other cities and towns with rates higher than 20 victims per 1,000 children were Central Falls, with 25.7, and Pawtucket, with 22.1, according to the 2017 edition of the Kids Count Fact Book.

Beyond focusing on solutions for concrete issues, the meeting is aimed at calling attention to the scale of child abuse in the city.

"I don't think it's well known beyond organizations like ours how significant child maltreatment is in Woonsocket," he said. "That doesn't necessarily mean parents are physically abusing children, it often means neglect. It's indicative of deep poverty situations. Sometimes parents just don't have the resources they need or they're trying to raise kids and work three or four jobs. We see that a lot."