



CHESTER COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY'S OFFICE

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**PRESS RELEASE**

**Chester County District Attorney's Office Handles  
Record Number Of Child Abuse Reports**

In 2017, the biggest child abuse story in Chester County was the conviction of the three adults charged in the killing of three-year old Scotty McMillan. However, in addition to that high-profile case, the Chester County District Attorney's Child Abuse Unit handled a record number of other child abuse cases.

District Attorney Tom Hogan stated, "With new reporting requirements and other factors, child abuse reports are up across Pennsylvania. Every time a child is abused, it is a tragedy. In Chester County, we are lucky to have the resources and dedicated personnel to handle this increased caseload."

Child abuse reports are made through a centralized reporting system called ChildLine. ChildLine reports can be made via phone (1-800- 932-0313) or through the ChildLine website. Once a ChildLine report has been made, the information is sent to the Chester County Child Advocacy Center, which is staffed by Chester County prosecutors and detectives. The prosecutors and detectives review the ChildLine information and determine which cases will be handled directly by the District Attorney's Office and which cases will be sent to other law enforcement agencies to investigate.

The number of child abuse reports has increased dramatically over the past few years. The yearly number of child abuse reports in Chester County are as follows:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Number of Reports</u>
2014	414
2015	1,306
2016	1,681
2017	1,924

These increases generally can be attributed to three factors. First, the conviction of Jerry Sandusky for abusing multiple children triggered a heightened awareness about child abuse. Second, the Sandusky scandal also resulted in a new Pennsylvania law vastly expanding the number of people who must report suspected child abuse and the types of incidents that must be reported. Third, Chester County has taken an aggressive role in child abuse education and prosecutions, leading to a greater sensitivity to child abuse issues in the community. In fact, the Crime Victims Center of Chester County and the District Attorney's Office are creating a program with the Chester County school districts to help educate children in every grade school in the County.

How is Chester County dealing with the increase in child abuse reports? The Chester County District Attorney's Office anticipated the increasing needs for child abuse prosecutions. With the approval of the Chester County Commissioners, the District Attorney's Office doubled the number of prosecutors and detectives working on child abuse cases and added staff members to address the incoming reports.

Michelle Kichline, Chair of the Chester County Commissioners, stated, "A key priority of the Board of Commissioners is the safety of our citizens, especially the safety of our children. Our discussions with the District Attorney noted the expected increase in child abuse reports which is distressing and heart rendering, but unfortunately a reality. We did not hesitate to provide the resources needed by the District Attorney and his staff and appreciate everything that they are doing to protect the children during the emotional process of investigation and prosecution."

Once a child abuse report has been received, the cases must be handled very carefully, both to preserve evidence and protect traumatized children. Children are brought to the Chester County Child Advocacy Center (the “CAC”), located inside the District Attorney’s Office, to be interviewed. The CAC is designed to be a “kid-friendly zone,” where the children can feel secure and comfortable. The CAC has toys for the kids, an area for family members, and access to a comfort dog for children who are calmed by pets.

All interviews are conducted by detectives who are specially trained “forensic interviewers.” Forensic interviewers have received intensive training on how to interview abused children, making sure to elicit facts without re-traumatizing the child. Virtually every Chester County Detective has been to a nationally-accredited forensic interviewing school. The District Attorney’s Office also has a Spanish-speaking detective, a vital tool when speaking with children for whom English is a second language.

The forensic interviews of abused children are often the key to a child abuse case. The number of forensic interviews conducted in Chester County also has been rising steadily, reflecting the increased number of reports and the increased resources used on these cases.

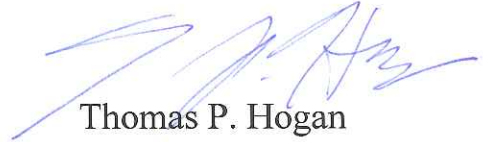
<u>Year</u>	<u>Number of Forensic Interviews</u>
2014	233
2015	251
2016	358
2017	363

Erin O’Brien is a Chester County child abuse prosecutor who previously served as an Assistant Chief in the Philadelphia District Attorney’s Office handling child abuse and sexual assault cases. Ms. O’Brien was lured to join the Chester County District Attorney’s Office both by the chance to raise her family in Chester County and the resources available in Chester County to fight child abuse. Ms. O’Brien stated, “As a prosecutor, I am overwhelmed by the resources and dedication of Chester County to fight child abuse. Our detectives, police, and prosecutors are given every tool available to protect children and prosecute predators. This is the way all counties should fight child abuse.”

District Attorney Hogan added, "In Chester County, these child abuse reports are not just statistics. We take child abuse personally. We treat every child abuse case like the child is a member of our Chester County family. And we will never quit until people stop hurting children."

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Approved for release:



Thomas P. Hogan