

ChildLine, Pennsylvania's Child Abuse Hotline – Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare
800-932-0313

How Can I Locate a Lawyer?

Call the Pennsylvania Bar Association Lawyer Referral Service toll free at 800-692-7375. Many counties have this same service. Check your Yellow Pages under “attorneys” for more details. In addition, you can contact your local legal services office to see if it can provide legal representation in cases of child abuse.

Reporting Child Abuse

What Is Child Abuse?

Child abuse, according to the Pennsylvania Child Protective Service Law, includes any recent act or failure to act by a perpetrator that causes nonaccidental serious physical injury or nonaccidental serious mental injury to a child under 18 years of age, sexual abuse or sexual exploitation of a child under 18 years of age, and serious neglect. “Recent” is defined as an abusive act within two years from the date ChildLine is called. Sexual abuse has no time limit.

Child abuse also includes any recent act, failure to act or series of acts or failures to act by a perpetrator that creates an imminent risk of serious physical injury to or sexual abuse or exploitation of a child under 18 years of age.

Who Should Report Child Abuse?

Anyone may report child abuse. As a guiding principle, a person should immediately report cases in which that person has a reasonable cause to suspect child abuse has occurred. Firsthand observation of abuse is not required. If a report is made based on good faith suspicion that abuse is occurring or has occurred, the person reporting the abuse will be immune from any resulting legal proceedings.

Under Pennsylvania law, those who come into contact with children on a regular basis as part of their work are considered to be mandated reporters. Mandated reporters must report suspicions of abuse of any child under the care, supervision, guidance or training of the agency, institution, organization or other entity with which the mandated reporter is affiliated. Mandated reporters include but are not limited to medical and mental health professionals, child care and day care workers, law enforcement officials, foster care workers, hospital personnel, school teachers, school personnel, athletic coaches, social service workers, attorneys and members of the clergy. For attorneys and ordained members of the clergy, there are limitations on privileged communication (private statements meant to be kept in confidence for the benefit of the reporter) in cases of child abuse.

Special Note: This pamphlet has been issued to inform and not to advise. It is based on Pennsylvania law. The statements are general, and individual facts in a given case may alter their application or involve other laws not referred to here.

Consumer Legal Information



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Again, any person with reasonable cause to suspect that a child has been abused may make a report. Reports are accepted regardless of whether or not the person identifies herself or himself.

How Is a Report Filed?

To file a report, call the ChildLine at 800-932-0313. This toll-free hotline is staffed around the clock by the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare (DPW). A person may report suspected child abuse through the ChildLine without giving his or her name, unless that person is a mandated reporter. The law requires mandated reporters to identify themselves and where they can be reached in case a caseworker requires additional information.

If a person believes there is imminent danger of a crime being committed against a child, the person is encouraged to call the local police.

If a person suspects that a child is being left alone and that child is too young to be left without supervision, the person should call the ChildLine and the police for immediate investigation.

Mandated reporters should immediately notify the person in charge of the institution (e.g., school principal, head administrator, pastor) or the person designated by the institution to handle child abuse reporting when child abuse is suspected.

The person in charge of the institution or designated by the institution to handle child abuse reporting must immediately notify the ChildLine at 800-932-0313. That person may not make an independent decision regarding whether or not to report the suspected abuse. Within 48 hours of the telephone report, those in charge of the institution or the designated person must file a written report to the child protective services agency in the county in which the suspected abuse has occurred. If information is not available to complete the form entirely, the reporter of suspected abuse should not conduct his or her own investigation in an effort to obtain the requested information.

School administrators also must report the suspected abuse to local police and the local district attorney's office.

A mandated reporter who does not work in an institution with an identified child abuse reporter must report suspected abuse on his or her own.

If the person in charge of the institution or the identified reporter for that institution is the suspected abuser, a mandated reporter must make the report on his or her own.

The mandated reporter should keep confidential the fact that a report of suspected child abuse was filed and the details included in the report.

A person reporting a suspected case of child abuse may not interfere with any official investigation by authorities.

What Happens After a Report is Filed?

If the report concerns a perpetrator as defined by law (a child's parent, the person responsible for the welfare of the child, an individual residing in the same home as the child who is at least 14 years of age or a paramour of the child's parent regardless of whether he or she lives in the home), ChildLine forwards the information to the local county children and youth agency. If the report does not suggest abuse but does suggest a need for other services, that information is forwarded to the appropriate staff at the county agency. If the report does indicate abuse, the county agency must investigate to determine if the child should be taken into protective custody. The county agency must begin the investigation within 24 hours of the report of suspected abuse and complete the investigation within 30 days unless the agency provides justification as to why the investigation cannot be completed, including attempts being made to obtain medical records or interview subjects of the report. If the investigation is not completed in 60 days, the report is automatically unfounded.

If the county agency receives a report that a child has been left unsupervised, the child's home will be visited by a county agency employee as soon as possible. That visit may be made without notice.

If the allegations concern an individual other than a defined perpetrator, the ChildLine report is forwarded to the county district attorney's office for investigation. Reports of allegations involving Children, Youth and Families (CYF) or a CYF contracted provider are turned over to the regional DPW office.

Is the Identity of the Person Reporting Suspected Child Abuse Kept Confidential?

Information that would identify the person who made a report of suspected child abuse or who cooperated in an investigation of abuse is kept confidential. However, the Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare may release information if there is a determination that such a disclosure would not be harmful to the reporting person's safety.

The name of the person reporting suspected abuse may be given to law enforcement officials investigating cases of homicide, child abuse, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, serious bodily injury perpetrated by persons not related to the victim, and to law enforcement officials investigating report of repeated physical injury indicating the child's health and welfare is harmed or in danger. Reporting sources are to be kept confidential by law enforcement officials.

With written consent, the person making the report can voluntarily have his or her name released.

Can a Mandated Reporter be Penalized by an Employer for Making an Abuse Report?

Provided that reports of suspected child abuse are made in good faith and based on reasonable suspicion that abuse has occurred, a mandated reporter may bring legal action in a court of common pleas against his or her employer if workplace discrimination or wrongful discharge results from reporting suspected child abuse. The court has the power to order appropriate relief, including job reinstatement and back pay.

What Are the Penalties for Failure to Report Child Abuse?

Those who are mandated by law to report child abuse and who willfully fail to do so face a misdemeanor of the third degree (up to a \$2,500 fine and/or one year in prison) and a misdemeanor of the second degree for a second or subsequent offense (up to a \$5,000 fine and/or two years in prison).