

Kassidy's death spurs reform efforts in N.H.

Grass-roots group calls for revisions to the New Hampshire Child Protection Act

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ROCHESTER — A local girl's death has become the catalyst for a grass-roots effort to hold violators of New Hampshire's mandatory child abuse reporting law accountable for their inaction.

Kassidy Caitlyn Bortner died in November after her mother's live-in boyfriend allegedly beat the 21-month-old child repeatedly over a six-week period.

The boyfriend, Chad E. Evans, 29, of Milton Road in Rochester has since been charged with second-degree murder and multiple counts of assault in connection with Kassidy's death.

However, the petitioners working to get the state's law changed do not believe that is enough.

"We, the undersigned residents of the state of New Hampshire, wish to express our shock and horror at the brutality and suffering endured by Kassidy Bortner in the weeks prior to her death," the petition reads. "In memory of Kassidy, as well as the other three babies murdered in New Hampshire last year and the three infants whose deaths are under

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law changed
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investigation, we ask you, our legislators, to revise the New Hampshire Child Protection Act, which is clearly ineffective."

Howard C. Hedegard Jr. of Epsom is the spokesman for the effort. The petition was first circulated in the Lakes Region by a woman who, like Hedegard, had been following the details of Kassidy's death in the press.

Hedegard, who previously lived in Maine and the greater Rochester area, worked extensively in the nonprofit sector before establishing his company, Dear Child Publications, to promote the value and well-being of children.

When he read of Kassidy's short life and the details of her death, Hedegard said he had to get involved.

In the past three weeks, petitioners have collected approximately 400 signatures.

"We are part of a grass-roots effort committed to increasing the awareness of child abuse within New Hampshire and to encouraging the state legislative body to pass laws that will more effectively deal with the reporting of child abuse cases," Hedegard said. "The evidence

shows that many people close to Kassidy, including the mother, knew of the abuse and failed to speak up."

Kassidy's mother, Amanda Bortner, 19, is cited in police affidavits as describing what the toddler endured during the two months they lived with Evans. In the affidavits, Bortner tells police that Evans allegedly threw Kassidy into walls, choked her until she gagged, grabbed her face and picked her up by the head.

Medical reports referenced in the affidavits allude to other types of abuse against Kassidy, including a fractured arm, a broken leg and pin-prick marks on the soles of her feet.

Bortner told police she and Evans agreed not to seek medical treatment for Kassidy's injuries and to tell anyone who asked that the child fell down the stairs or off a trampoline.

Hedegard said Bortner's knowledge of Kassidy's abuse mirror his experience in Minnesota in the 1970s when he worked at a shelter for abused children.

"So many of these women were so hungry for love and acceptance for themselves that

they took it at the expense of their children," Hedegard said.

The petition requests changes in New Hampshire laws to make it more like Minnesota's current child abuse reporting statute, which has explicit penalties for those who do not report — and imposes felony charges for parents suspected of not intervening when their children are being abused.

"We petition you to seek strict penalties for parents and others who do not report suspicion of child abuse," the petition states. "Further, when serious injury to or death of a child occurs, we demand that individuals with reason to suspect abuse be prosecuted as accessories to a felony if they did not report their suspicions."

To date, petition signers come from communities across the state, including Portsmouth, Durham, Stratham, Greenland, Epsom, Belmont, Franklin, Northfield, Sanbornton and Londonderry.

"We have a responsibility to protect those who are more vulnerable," Hedegard said. "This is a legal way, a political way, of trying to promote the value of children. There is nothing more important than our children."

While there has been strong support for the petition, Hedegard said people have

How to sign 'Kassidy's Petition'

ROCHESTER — If the efforts in New Hampshire and Maine to revising the laws governing child abuse are successful, Kassidy Bortner will have done more in her short life than many accomplished in 20 years.

That was the sentiment expressed by Howard C. Hedegard Jr. of Epsom, N.H., chairman of a grass-roots effort to get the state legislature to pass a child abuse reporting statute that would make it a felony to fail to report suspicion of child abuse.

Hedegard said others involved in the effort began circulating petitions in Rochester last week and collected

about 400 signatures. Their goal is to present their case to the New Hampshire Legislature in an effort to prevent other children from suffering the abuse Kassidy reportedly endured in the weeks before her death in November.

Anyone interested in signing "Kassidy's Petition" or assisting with the effort to amend the child abuse reporting statute is asked to contact Howard C. Hedegard Jr. by electronic mail at howard@dearchild.com or by writing to Dear Child Publications, P.O. Box 70, Epsom, N.H. 03224.

expressed concern about such issues as mistaken reporting and demands on the system by the increase in reports being filed.

Hedegard said that when looking at what happened to Kassidy, those risks are worth taking.

"That's really what it's all about — if we're serious about protecting those who cannot protect themselves," he said. "I just don't think there's any greater responsibility."

Studies show that anywhere in the country, at any given time, there are children enduring abuse.

In too many cases, Hedegard said, the suffering of children such as Kassidy goes unreported until it is too late.

Hedegard said the problem with New Hampshire's mandated reporting law is that failure to report the abuse of a child is not treated as a serious offense.

"Because it is a misdemeanor, it's never enforced. That's why Kassidy's mother — and others — are never going to be charged," Hedegard said. "Kassidy's story, in particular, exemplifies everything that has to be changed."

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