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Petitioners building momentum for 'Kassidy Law'

By JENNIFER L. SAUNDERS

Democrat Staff Writer

ROCHESTER — The effort to create stiff penalties for violators of New Hampshire's child abuse reporting law is gaining strong support statewide in memory of Kassidy Bortner.

Howard C. Hedegard Jr., spokesman for the grass-roots effort behind "Kassidy's Petition," said the number of New Hampshire voters who have signed petitions has doubled since April. There are at least 800 signatures on the petitions.

The effort, which began in the Lakes Region, has spread to include strong support from individuals in the Seacoast, Concord and southern New Hampshire.

The petition will be presented to New Hampshire legislators. If the effort is successful, it would mandate felony charges for individuals who do not report child abuse suspicions in cases where a child is seriously injured or killed.

Kassidy died at York Hospital in York, Maine, on Nov. 9 after what court documents describe as weeks of abuse at the hands of her mother's live-in boyfriend, Chad E. Evans of 191 Milton Road in Rochester. Kassidy was 21 months old at the time of her death.

Evans, 29, has since been charged with second-degree murder and is awaiting a November trial at Strafford County Superior Court.

Kassidy's mother, 19-year-old Amanda Bortner, knew her boyfriend abused Kassidy for up to six weeks before the child's death, according to statements she made to police as recorded in court documents. Bortner neither reported Kassidy's many injuries nor sought medical attention for the child, according to authorities.

New Hampshire does have a mandatory reporting law for anyone who suspects child abuse, however, it imposes only misdemeanor or civil penalties for violators. The penalties include a fine of at least \$2,000 or up to one year in prison, according to the law.

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Classified	Hedegard said there is a recurring theme from those New Hampshire residents who have contacted him in the past month — an outcry for penalties against Kassidy's mother and for a revocation of Evans' bail. Evans was released on \$100,000 bail on Nov. 22.
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Biz Guide	Among the responses have been many letters, stories and signatures from Lilac City residents who feel a personal connection to the petition effort.
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The clerk told Hedegard she remembered the child's face was badly bruised and that when she questioned the mother, the parent said the little girl fell and then abruptly left the store.

Weeks later, when photographs of Kassidy were published in news accounts after her death, the woman recognized the little girl from the store.

A stranger to Kassidy and her mother, the woman only saw them that one time, but told Hedegard she has been haunted by the memory of her brief meeting with Kassidy and the knowledge she now has of the abuse she suffered.

After talking with Hedegard, she took several copies of the petition to seek signatures.

Hedegard said the tone of many of the responses he has received from residents across the state who have signed on to help circulate petitions can be summed up in the word "why."

Among those who have joined the effort is Nick Barous of the Cat 'n' Fiddle Restaurant in Concord. In April, Barous and his employees placed a poster Hedegard made with Kassidy's picture in the entryway of the restaurant and asked patrons to sign the petition and help spread the word. To date, Hedegard said, the response has been very strong — with the restaurant alone collecting hundreds of signatures in support of the effort.

The letters Hedegard has received reflect the anger and frustration at Kassidy's death and support of the effort to protect victims of child abuse.

"The law is too lenient," one Rochester woman wrote in a letter to Hedegard, expressing her intent to sign the petition and her anger that Kassidy's death brought only a second-degree murder charge.

"It's not enough. First-degree — shock and horror at the brutality and suffering endured by Kassidy Bortner," she wrote.

"The mother should be held, too," another Rochester woman wrote.

"Kassidy should have been protected, especially by her mom. There is no man on earth that should be valued more than any child," a second Rochester couple stated in their petition letter.

Bortner, a former Sanford High School student who had taken a job at a Kittery, Maine, outlet store, brought her daughter to live with Evans at his Milton Road home for the two months preceding Kassidy's death. Evans, a district manager for many area McDonald's restaurants, reportedly met Bortner about four months before they moved in together.

In the weeks before her death, Kassidy did not smile often, according to details in New Hampshire State Police affidavits filed at Rochester District Court. In fact, she is described just as the woman in the Rochester store recalled. Several witnesses are quoted in the affidavits remembering Kassidy as withdrawn, fearful and bruised.

"She was very pretty. She had a wonderful personality. She had the most beautiful eyes and smile you'd ever want to see," Kassidy's maternal grandmother, Jacqueline Conley, told Foster's Daily Democrat in January.

Hedegard said even those who have expressed frustration with the state's Division of Children, Youth and Families have agreed to help with the petition drive as a first step toward improving the system.

Hedegard said the petition drive is a small way to ensure that a child he did not know — but cannot forget — did not die in vain.

Hedegard urges anyone who would like to sign the petition or assist with the effort to contact him by e-mail at howard@dearchild.com, by writing to Dear Child Publications, P.O. Box 750, Epsom, N.H. 03234 or by calling 736-8089.