

Confusion and fear contribute to lack of sexual abuse reports

By Robert Long, BDN Staff

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AUGUSTA, Maine — Maine law mandates that people who work with children and dependent adults report suspected abuse or neglect to state authorities.

Yet, as the Maine State Police report on the investigation of alleged sexual abuse by the late Rev. Robert Carlson indicates, many people — even those required by law to do so — remain reluctant to report suspected abuse.

Why?

Confusion about what constitutes grounds for submitting a report, fear of harming reputations, not knowing the victims, lack of resources, personal risk and a “culture of silence,” especially about sexual abuse, all impede the reporting process, according to those who work with assault victims.

“Folks don’t want to report because they don’t have proof and, if they’re wrong, they fear it will reflect badly” on the subject of the report and the reporter, said Sue Hall Dreher, executive director of [Sexual Support Services of Midcoast Maine](#).

“The law is clear. All we need is suspicion, not proof,” Hall Dreher said. [Mandated reporters](#) aren’t investigators, but alerting authorities of their suspicions “makes it possible for professionals trained to investigate to do their jobs,” she said.

Some medical professionals and others with close contacts to families in which abuse is suspected “don’t want to risk the relationship they have established with the family or believe they can work with the family through this,” said Therese Cahill-Low, director of the [Maine Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of Child and Family Services](#).

“Other professionals have told me they don’t report because they feel that our staff is already overloaded and overwhelmed, while others don’t believe we will do anything anyway, so it’s not worth the risk,” Cahill-Low said.

In high-profile cases such as those involving Carlson and Jerry Sandusky, an assistant football coach at Penn State recently convicted of sexually abusing boys over decades, “numerous people had reason to suspect and, for whatever reason, they didn’t believe what they suspected rose to the level of reporting,” Hall Dreher said.

“People don’t want to believe outstanding members of a community would do something,” said Cara Courchesne, communications and outreach coordinator for the [Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault](#). “They are the person the community trusts. It gives them access to children.” Fear that an allegation of abuse against a prominent figure could be viewed as malicious also creates reluctance among mandated reporters, Hall Dreher said.

When weighing the potential damage to the reputation of a well-established figure accused of

abuse, the conflict often breaks down to possibly hurting someone the reporter knows versus harming someone that they don't know, namely a victim, according to Hall Dreher.

The anonymity of what often can be a network of victims makes it hard to appreciate the direct human effect of failing to report suspected abuse, she said.

"If one person suspects something and makes that call to authorities, the facade of the abuser will begin to crack, and investigations will reveal the truth," Cahill-Low said.

Concern about negative effects on reputations extends beyond individuals to organizations, according to Brunswick police Capt. Mark Waltz, a veteran criminal investigator who is chairman of the Sexual Assault Support Services of Midcoast Maine board.

"I'm aware of some agencies that deal with children that tell their workers they should make their reports to their supervisors rather than to DHHS directly," Waltz said.

In that vein, Courchesne expressed concern about "institutional issues" that might preclude lower-echelon employees from reporting abuse "for fear of what someone above them might do."

"If a janitor sees abuse, they should be able to report to a supervisor and make a good-faith assumption that the report will move up," she said.

An institutional "you tell us and we'll tell the state" approach creates an "extra layer of bureaucracy," Waltz said. "DHHS, not employers, should be screening reports."

Change the system?

High-profile abuse cases such as those involving Carlson and Sandusky trigger calls to strengthen the law. But experts interviewed for this report generally agree that Maine's mandated reporter law and abuse response system work.

"We have a good system in place," Hall Dreher said. "The problem is more human nature than the system. It's hard for a caller to make a report and not know the outcome."

To promote direct reporting, Waltz suggested that the phrase "or cause a report to be made" be stricken from the [mandated reporter law](#). The law simply should read "shall report," he said. Stricter enforcement of financial sanctions against mandated reporters who fail to abide by the law might improve compliance among professionals whose licensing could be affected, Waltz said. The Brunswick Police Department never has prosecuted a mandated reporter for failure to submit a report, according to Waltz. DHHS spokesman John Martins told the Bangor Daily News that [the penalty is rarely, if ever, applied](#).

As to whether more professions should be added to the list of mandated reporters, Cahill-Low replied, "I am of the belief that everyone should be a mandated reporter."

The Department of Health and Human Services offers [free online training for mandated reporters](#). Hall Dreher and Waltz both endorsed more standardized training for mandated reporters.

Cahill-Low said her office is looking into having training done by professionals in the particular field.

"It seems likely training done to a group of pediatricians would be more effective if done by a trained pediatrician, to a group of law enforcement officials by a trained police officer, or to a group of school personnel by a person within that school setting," she said.

“Given what I see many children go through before we actually get a call, [the system] has to improve,” Cahill-Low said, “Our next generation depends on it.”

A new conversation

Rather than tweaking laws, Courchesne said, society needs to change the underlying cultural systems that allow abuse to continue.

“The more people are willing to talk about abuse in general, the more comfortable it will be to talk about it when there’s a suspicion — when it really matters,” she said.

In a “culture of silence” created by the unpleasant nature of the topic, “so much fear around talking about the issue becomes paralyzing,” she said.

Referring to websites such as Stop It Now! Courchesne said it’s possible to talk about sexual abuse in a way that emphasizes nurturing safer communities rather than a climate of suspicion.

“Child abuse and neglect is not an easy topic to talk about; we have to cut through the stigma,” Cahill-Low said. “We as a society have some responsibility for ensuring the safety of children; children cannot protect themselves and are often threatened not to tell anyone of the abuse. They also often love their abusers. We as adults need to do what we can to protect children, even if it makes us uneasy.”

To report suspected child abuse or neglect, call 800-452-1999.

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