

THE YORK DISPATCH
York County's Afternoon Paper

Panel looks for ways to limit child abuse in York County

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Updated: 06/11/2010 10:53:20 AM EDT



Darisabel

Two years after toddler Darisabel Baez was fatally beaten in her home, York County and state officials are trying to figure out the best ways to prevent another case like hers.

Child advocates and law enforcement members held a panel discussion Thursday night to discuss ways to reduce child abuse in the county. York County ranked third in the state on child abuse cases last year.

Darisabel Baez was fatally beaten by her mother's live-in boyfriend, Harve L. Johnson, in April 2008. Johnson, 27, confessed to beating the child with a video-game controller, according to charging documents. He has been convicted and was sentenced to death.

Richard Gold, deputy secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare and director of the Office of Children, Youth and Families, said the state has implemented a safety assessment tool to guide workers on signs of abuse.

"If there are indications that a child is at risk -- we can take action," he said.

There were 147 substantiated child abuse cases in the county last year. The Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare reported for every 1,000 children in York County, there were 11/2 cases of substantiated abuse cases in 2009.

Working together: Gold said the key to preventing child abuse is for all organizations to work together and fight abuse from the roots.

"In the past we dealt with symptoms instead of the root cause," he said. "We need to work with other systems to get to the root cause."

The panel discussion opened up for questions from the public. York City Police Officer Lisa Daniels, who was one of the first responders to Darisabel's house the day she was found, expressed frustration for the lighter sentence Darisabel's mother received.

She said she would like to see tougher penalties for those who are aware child abuse is happening and allow it to continue.

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"To me, its ridiculous that we don't have that on the books," she said.

Darisabel's mother, Neida Elizabeth Baez, 20, pleaded guilty to third-degree murder and received five to 10 years in prison.

During her trial, Baez told jurors she was in the room next to where Johnson was beating her daughter. She said she "could hear the whistle of the remote control" as it whipped through the air and hit Darisabel. During the beating, she said, she heard Darisabel cry for her.

The panel discussion was hosted by YorkCounts, a community-based coalition that works to assess, sustain and enhance quality of life in York County.

To report suspected child abuse, call The Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare's ChildLine, a toll-free, 24-hour hotline that allows anyone to anonymously report abuse. The number is 1-800-932-0313.

--Reach Amanda Dolasinski at 505-5434 or adolasinski@yorkdispatch.com.

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