



## With Darisabel in mind, community looks to fight child abuse

By EMILY OPILO  
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At times during the screening and public forum Thursday night at the Jewish Community Center, a child could be heard crying, but no one seemed to mind.

After all, much of the group, which included nearly 250 local police, medical personnel, lawmakers and advocates, have dedicated their lives to protecting children. They came together for a summit to remember the life of 2-year-old Darisabel Baez, who was abused and beaten to death at the hands of her mother's boyfriend.

The meeting, held to gather input on how to combat child abuse in York County, began with a showing of "Carrying Darisabel," a documentary film produced by the York Daily Record.

Audible gasps and sometimes tears punctuated the silence during the film as the officials who were first to find Darisabel's body described her condition.

With the images of Darisabel fresh in their minds, attendees worked to generate a list of tangible ideas for combating increasing child

abuse in York County.

Unlike rates across the state, child abuse in York County is still on the rise, said James DeBord, director of YorkCounts, the event's sponsor. YorkCounts, which collects data on the subject, will reconvene a group of experts again in the next six weeks to create an action plan, DeBord said.

York County deals with about 45 cases of child abuse every week, said Bev Mackereth, director of York County Human Services. Many of those cases involve families that have other issues treated by the county, including drug and

alcohol abuse or mental health problems, she said.

The mix of drugs and abuse can no longer be considered an urban problem, said Richard Gold, deputy secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, citing a case in Clarion County in which 22 children were found when several methamphetamine labs were raided.

Communication between agencies is key, but the community is the first line of defense against abuse, he said.

"All it takes is one block, one church with one neighborhood with one block and all of a sudden, that block, that neighborhood, becomes safer," Gold said. "Not just for the kids, by the way, but for everybody."

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York City Police Officer Lisa Daniels, who was one of the first police officials to respond in Darisabel's case, suggested greater accountability moving forward for the parents who allow abuse to happen. Like a driver who knowingly allows an unlicensed driver to use his or her car, those who permit violation should be charged, she said.

"Our biggest frustration as the first responders was the law didn't give us the teeth to prosecute the mother in this case," she said. "My personal professional opinion is that she's equally responsible because this was her flesh and blood."

**Quoted**

- David Turkewitz, chairman of pediatrics at York Hospital: "The agencies are not going to stop child abuse. The DA's office is not going to stop child abuse. This is a community issue. And it really just starts with all of you."
- Marie Bell, program director of Family Life Services for Family-Child Resources: "We have programs all over the county, but we struggle getting the people to the services."
- Jennifer Englerth, director of Family First Health, which offers the Nurse-Family Partnership program: "If we're not as a community embracing new parents, then we'll get the results that we saw. Yes, we need to advocate for the children, but when you see a stressed out parent beside you at church or beside you in your neighborhood, reach out to them and ask

what you can do to help."**Goals**

- Establish better technology for sharing information across agencies
  - Provide more behavioral health services following abuse
  - Provide more preventative assistance for new parents
  - Raise awareness of existing support groups
  - Mandatory training in the recognition of abuse for all school personnel
- Darisabel Baez case**Harve Lamar Johnson fatally beat 2-year-old Darisabel Baez, his girlfriend's daughter, on April 6, 2008, in the couple's York apartment.A York County jury convicted Johnson, 28, of first-degree murder and sentenced him to death. Neida Elizabeth Baez, 21, the girl's mother, pleaded guilty to third-degree murder for not intervening on Darisabel's behalf. She was sentenced to five to 10 years in state prison.
- Watch the "Carrying Darisabel" documentary **Also of interest-Darisabel Baez: 'If you see a child who you suspect has been neglected or abused that is the name that should just enter into your mind'**

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