



## Lessons from Darisabel: Community, not law, needs to change

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Darisabel Baez (Submitted)

In 1982, the violent beating death of 5-year-old Aleta Bailey moved York County officials and people across the state to reform child abuse laws, creating more open communication between welfare agencies and police.

Now, nearly 30 years later, it is Darisabel Baez's turn.

Darisabel, 2, suffered abuse and a fatal beating at the hands of her mother's boyfriend, Harve Johnson, on April 6, 2008. Aleta also died at the hands of her mother's boyfriend.

More than 72 bruises and lacerations were found on Darisabel's body the day she died, and Johnson was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to death.

The cases are easily compared -- both Aleta and Darisabel's injuries were unthinkable severe, first responders said -- but the changes needed in the aftermath of Darisabel's death aren't the same as they were in Aleta's time, said Bev Mackareth, director of York County Human Services, who was an intake caseworker when she handled Aleta's case.

Then it was the legal system that was hampering the ability to fight child abuse. Now the focus must turn to the community, she said on the heels of Thursday's public forum dealing with the problem.

"It's not about laws and agencies and government," she said. "We're not going to solve the problem. It's about people and people connecting with others and caring about others and really taking the opportunity to interact with others."

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The resources exist, but the struggle has been getting people to use them, Mackareth

said. That has to begin at home with neighbors and community members reaching out to people who are struggling and more prone to child abuse, she said.

"Mentor, support, help your neighbor if they can't afford their electric bill or get them some help," she said. "We've had so many families living in hotels. Talk about stress."

**Faith-based solution**

Trained professionals can recognize the signs of child abuse, but they can't be everywhere. That's where the faith-based community can step in, Aaron Anderson said. A pastor of York's City Church, he was one of Darisabel's neighbors.

"There are a lot of services and agencies that are out there, but there seems to be a very big disconnect with those services reaching the street. We've got to figure out how to bridge that gap. And I think churches and communities of faith could be helpful in doing that."

Anderson said he would be open to receiving additional training to recognize signs of abuse and to help struggling, new parents avoid situations where abuse can occur. The faith community can reach out where the government can't, he said.

**First line of defense**

When looking at community solutions, you can't ignore the local schools that work with children on a daily basis, said Angela Liddle, director of Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance.

Free training is available for school districts, but too few are taking advantage of it, she said. Across the state, only 15 percent have participated, but legislation has been proposed that would make it mandatory.

And it's not as simple as training teachers to recognize signs of abuse, Liddle said. There must also be a support network in place.

Liddle said she recently spoke with a teacher in the Dallastown Area School District who received the training but needed help talking to a sexually abused student.

"She knew what she had to do in terms of reporting, but you know what she struggled with? 'I have to talk to this student. ... I just need someone to talk about with this. This is very uncomfortable for me,'" Liddle said.

**Legal imperfections**

Although the law protecting against child abuse has come a long way since the days of Aleta Bailey, that doesn't mean there isn't work to be done, said Patti O'Brien, a forensic nurse at York Hospital. O'Brien took pictures of Darisabel's injuries as a trauma team treated her.

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More could be done to protect the children who are survivors of abuse including removing a requirement that children testify in open court, O'Brien said. There are some provisions to avoid it, but it remains the standard practice, she said.

Recording testimony with a judge and attorneys present would be just as effective, O'Brien said.

"It's hard enough for me as a medical provider to testify in court," she said. "I can only imagine for a child what they have to go through on that stand...When you think about sitting up there in this big, huge room with all these people staring at you, it's difficult to testify."

**What's next**

YorkCounts, which co-sponsored Thursday's summit "After Darisabel: Reducing Child Abuse in York County," will reconvene a group of experts in the next six months to create a list of goals for action, said James DeBord, director of YorkCounts.

**Resources**

- York County Children and Youth Services: Child Abuse Prevention/Outreach Committee

[www.yccys.org](http://www.yccys.org)

- YWCA's Access-York: assistance for victims of domestic violence

[www.ywcayork.org/victim-services](http://www.ywcayork.org/victim-services)

- Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect Program

[www.pascan.org](http://www.pascan.org)

- The CASA Program: advocacy for abused neglected children

[www.york-county.org/services/casa.htm](http://www.york-county.org/services/casa.htm)

- Catholic Charities IFS

[dioceseofharrisburg.org](http://dioceseofharrisburg.org), click on catholic charities

- Family-Child Resources: support for families

[www.f-cr.com](http://www.f-cr.com)

- Healthy York County Coalition

[www.healthyyork.org](http://www.healthyyork.org)

- The Lehman Center: support for children and families

[www.cassd.org](http://www.cassd.org)

- Nurse Family Partnership: skills program for first-time mothers

[www.myfamilyfirsthealth.org/nursefamily.html](http://www.myfamilyfirsthealth.org/nursefamily.html)

- Pressley Ridge: services for troubled children

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- Visions of Hope: mental health services for children and adults

[visionsofhopeonline.com](http://visionsofhopeonline.com)

- York City Health Bureau

[www.yorkcity.org](http://www.yorkcity.org), click Departments, then Bureau of Health

- York County Children's Advocacy Center

[www.yorkcac.org](http://www.yorkcac.org)

- ChildLine: state 24-hour hotline to report abuse

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