

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to speak on this most important subject.

Today's proclamation states 'The majority of child abuse cases stem from situations and conditions that are preventable in an engaged and supportive community.'

A focal point of the proclamation being brought forward today expresses the necessity to collaborate among agencies and individuals. I would like to emphasize how important this is. A few months ago, I would not have much knowledge of this statement however unfortunately today I do.

When an allegation of abuse is brought to a parent's knowledge there are many factors that determine the next steps to take. Except for almost without a doubt two things. First is involving the Humboldt County Sheriff's and second utilizing and partnering with Child Protective Services. I cannot imagine any two entities that have as much direct correlation, responsibility or power in protecting youth victims as the Sheriff's and Child Protective Services.

I would like to take a minute or less to offer some suggestions to these most important protectors.

First off listen to your victims. This process of being a victim and also having to be the advocate is not fair. Instead of 'innocent until proven guilty' we need to practice 'protected from until proven innocent'. Protect victims. On a local level mental health care for a child under 8 years old takes almost four months to obtain through DHHS. A case can literally be opened and closed before a child gets the chance to talk to a counselor. Are any of you familiar with children? How about a child that has been abused?

Let me share something with you. Children of abuse, especially long term abuse have one very strong skill and that is secrecy. To expect child victims to walk into any room with any stranger and pour out their trove of terrors is asinine. To not ensure the availability of counseling to these victims is detrimental. And to not trust the children's words-however few- is dangerous. When a child is brave enough to make a disclosure of abuse, that child depends on the adults in power to listen and to act accordingly. Worry about the victim over fear of repercussions for being wrong. The alternative is ongoing abuse, suffering and danger. So please consider what improvements can be made between child victims and support in the form of counselors locally. Next I want to say that there must be few jobs as challenging as

working in these professions. Our child protective workers and law enforcement are stretched too thin. Words are just words without interactions and people unfortunately act deceitful. Limiting time between a social worker and a victim limits opportunity to build trust. Children need to trust to open up about abuse. These rushed and very surface level interactions cannot be relied upon to determine the truth unfortunately. The Sheriff's, Child Protective Services and DHHS Children's Mental Health Services have the power to save kids from abuse. It takes more time than feels available as well as more effort than there seems time for. The most tangible, valuable, real and important representation of child abuse prevention is a protected child. Thank you.