
More people required to report abuse

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If you suspect child abuse but fail to report it, you could wind up in jail.

A recently passed revision of the Georgia law that requires teachers, doctors and other professionals to report suspected child abuse is so broad that just about anyone who comes into contact with kids could fall under its mandate.

Volunteers at churches, colleges, clubs, summer camps or soccer fields or parents who chaperone a field trip could go to jail if they fail to report suspected abuse under the new provision approved by lawmakers last week.

Child abuse can range from neglect and beatings to sexual abuse.

"If you volunteer with the Boys and Girls Club or volunteer with your church doing a children's service, that would make you a mandatory reporter," said Melissa Carter, director of the Barton Child Law and Policy Center at Emory University.

The change, when it becomes law, will mandate reporting by any employee or volunteer at any kind of agency, business, nonprofit or other group that works with children.

"It's hard to imagine an exception to that very broad category," Carter said. "It's very inclusive."

Violators can be charged with a misdemeanor and face up to a year in jail and a \$1,000 fine.

The amendment was added to House Bill 1176, which shortens sentences for small crimes to reduce the load on prisons. It was approved unanimously by both houses and awaits the signature of Gov. Nathan Deal, who touted the initiative as one of his top priorities.

Spokesman Brian Robinson said Deal "definitely will sign" the bill. It becomes law July 1.

"You're going to see an exponential increase in reports of potential child abuse," predicted John Adams, a former human resources official for the Cobb County School District.

Adams, who now runs a teachers advocacy group called Educators First, said under the new provisions it would conceivably apply to every PTA member and even parents who volunteer in a classroom.

Institutions will probably have to train, or at least educate, everyone who could fall under the law's provisions, Adams said.

But Carter said there probably won't be a flood of cases because "it's hard to figure out and then prove a failure to report."

Sen. Renee Unterman (R-Buford), authored the current mandatory reporting law that is limited to a handful of professions. This year, she proposed expanding it to all Georgians, but lawmakers thought that went too far. She said her goal was education and deterrence rather than prosecution for failure to report, though she said that three professionals have been convicted since the statute took effect in 2009.

Stan Gunter, a former prosecutor who now heads the Prosecuting Attorneys' Council of Georgia, said it will be up to local prosecutors to decide whether to press charges. He said the amendments to the law should help bring abusers to justice.

"You're going to run across situations where people knew but didn't say," Gunter said, "and this law may prompt them to come forward."

Adams said the increased case load that results from more reporting will push already-strained budgets when police and the Georgia Division of Family & Children Services have to investigate more cases.

Ravae Graham, spokeswoman for the Georgia Department of Human Services, which is over DFCS, said the agency was still reviewing the legislation to determine its effect.

The amendment was a bipartisan effort. It was written by Rep. Mary Margaret Oliver, D-Decatur, with help from Carter at Emory, and folded into the governor's sentencing bill by Rep. Rich Golick, R-Smyrna, co-chair of the House Special Joint Committee on Georgia Criminal Justice Reform.

Oliver said lawmakers concerned about child abuse seized on the public support for action in the wake of the scandal at Penn State University, where assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky was accused of child sexual abuse. Oliver wanted to ensure that athletic coaches were required to report.

Children form relationships with coaches that are at least as close as those with teachers, Oliver said, so coaches are likely to know when something is amiss. She said she also included clergy in the new legislation because she "fairly regularly" gets complaints from constituents about churches and clergy that are not reporting potential cases.

The bill defines clergy as functionaries of any bona fide religious organizations and mandates they report anything gleaned outside discussions, such as confessions, that are deemed confidential under the organization's doctrine.

The bill also clarifies the definition of school to mean anything from a pre-kindergarten institution to a college or vocational school.

And it adds reproductive health and abortion clinics to those institutions covered.

Perhaps the biggest change: Previously only employees were clearly mandated reporters, but now volunteers will fall under the provision.

"It's obviously going to be a big thing," said Mike Bryant, executive director of the Georgia Association of Christian Schools in Bogart. The group represents 55 mostly Baptist schools, a half dozen of them in metro Atlanta. The schools require background checks and fingerprinting for teachers, Bryant said, but churches and schools are probably "all over the map" on checks for volunteers at Sunday school, church nurseries or for those chaperoning field trips.

Bryant speculated it would force institutions to screen and train all staffers and volunteers or risk lawsuits.

"I'm sure all the insurance companies are going to jump on this and make sure their customers are covering themselves," he said.

Some groups already take precautions. Since 2002, the Archdiocese of Atlanta has run background checks on staff and volunteers and has required them to take training on mandatory reporting. Spokeswoman Meaghan Schroeder said it was a reaction to the child abuse scandal that rocked the Catholic church. Some volunteers didn't like jumping through those hoops at first, she said, but not anymore. "Everyone understands and accepts it as part of what we do and they're on board with it," she said.

Nancy Chandler, an expert on child abuse, said so few cases are reported that anything increasing the numbers is a good thing.

Chandler is chief executive of the Georgia Center for Child Advocacy, which conducts forensic interviews of alleged abuse victims on behalf of law enforcement and child protective authorities.

Her organization also trains civilians to spot and report abuse.

Training is great, she said, but if people don't have it they should simply err on the side of caution and let the experts decide whether abuse occurred.

"If you suspect," Chandler said, "call 911."

Staff writer Christopher Quinn contributed to this article.

Georgia's mandatory child abuse reporting statute currently applies to a narrow group of professionals, including doctors, nurses, psychologists, social workers, educators and childcare workers.

On July 1, an expansion of the law will cover just about everybody who comes into contact with children as a volunteer or staffer in any organized way. Examples given by experts: a parent helping out in a classroom or chaperoning on a field trip, a grandmother watching babies in the church nursery during service or a university student coaching kids in a summer camp on campus.

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