

## Area events highlight awareness, prevention of child abuse



Hadley Police Lt. Mitchell Kuc Jr., center, and Police Chief Michael Mason raise the Children's Memorial Flag outside Town Hall on Thursday. STAFF PHOTO/KEVIN GUTTING

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“Every child is entitled to be loved, cared for, secure, and protected from verbal, sexual, emotional and physical abuse, exploitation and neglect.”

So begins Easthampton Mayor Nicole LaChapelle's proclamation recognizing April as National Child Abuse Prevention Month, issued April 1 as local officials, police and activists raised the Children's Memorial Flag outside the Municipal Office Building, 50 Payson Ave.

Easthampton's ceremony was just one in a series of local flag-raising and memorial events since the beginning of the month.

On Friday at 5:30 p.m., the public is invited to gather at Childs Park in Northampton for the second annual "This Little Light of Mine" luminaria display. Candles will be placed in windows in business and homes throughout the Pioneer Valley, while 2,200 will be on display at Childs Park to represent the number of children served by the Children's Advocacy Center (CAC) of Hampshire County since 2006.

The CAC, an independent nonprofit in Northampton, and the CAC of Franklin County in Greenfield are among those spearheading the annual awareness effort with the help of elected leaders and volunteers throughout the Pioneer Valley and beyond.

Kara McElhone, the CAC's executive director, said 84% of children who are abused know, trust and love their abuser. For most of 2020, when schools met virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic, she said reports of child abuse plummeted, but "we know that's not because kids were safer."

Virtual learning "really narrowed the scope of who they were with," eliminating children's contact with trusted adults outside their families like athletic coaches, guidance counselors, nurses and others who are required by law to report suspected abuse and neglect.

When schools returned to in-person learning, McElhone said the CAC saw a 40% spike in children needing services in 2021 compared to pre-pandemic levels, "and it's trending the same way in 2022."

"This is a real issue here," she said.

Flag-raising have been held this month in communities including Northampton, South Hadley, Greenfield, Amherst, Belchertown and Athol. A ceremony on Thursday morning added Hadley Town Hall to the list.

The Children's Memorial Flag depicts five blue childlike figures holding hands on a red background, while a sixth figure is an outline to represent missing and victimized children.

State Rep. Dan Carey, D-Easthampton, attended three flag-raising in his district this month.

“You hope it doesn’t happen in your hometown, but child abuse is reported in all 351 cities and towns in Massachusetts every year. It is happening here,” Carey said.

He hopes the flags flying throughout the area will encourage “uncomfortable but necessary conversations.” During Thursday’s ceremony in Hadley, he said, a woman approached him and said she was abused as a child.

The woman “was saying that, when she was a kid, no one ever talked about child abuse,” Carey said. “We don’t want our youth now to live with that for the rest of their lives. We want the healing to start now.”

A former prosecutor, Carey was elected in 2018 and said he and the rest of the western Massachusetts legislative delegation work hard to support the Children’s Advocacy Centers in the region. He said that having on-site specialists and investigators shields the child from repeating their abuse story over and over.

“The first thing they did was inject compassion into criminal investigations,” Carey said of the CACs. “It used to be a young victim would have to go to the police station and answer important questions from someone who is not trained in working with children.”

Northwestern District Attorney David Sullivan said people generally don’t “understand the gravity of the problem” in their own community.

“Everybody can be a child protector” by raising the alarm on suspected abuse and neglect, Sullivan said. “They can call DCF or local law enforcement, and they’ll investigate, and they’ll certainly weed out the cases that are not abuse.”

Sullivan said his office alone receives 400 child abuse and neglect reports every year. In the first three months of the pandemic, reporting was down 80% even though “the same abuse was going on as before.”

“There really weren’t the eyes and ears in the community to report abuse, and it was so unfortunate that there weren’t the teachers, the nurses, the DCF workers in a classroom or a home to be able to take those reports,” he said.

On March 25, during a dinner in his honor at Look Park in Northampton, Sullivan received the 2022 Changemaker Award from the nonprofit Friends of Children Inc. The award honored “his work helping to investigate and provide solutions to

problems impacting vulnerable people in our region,” according to online program materials.

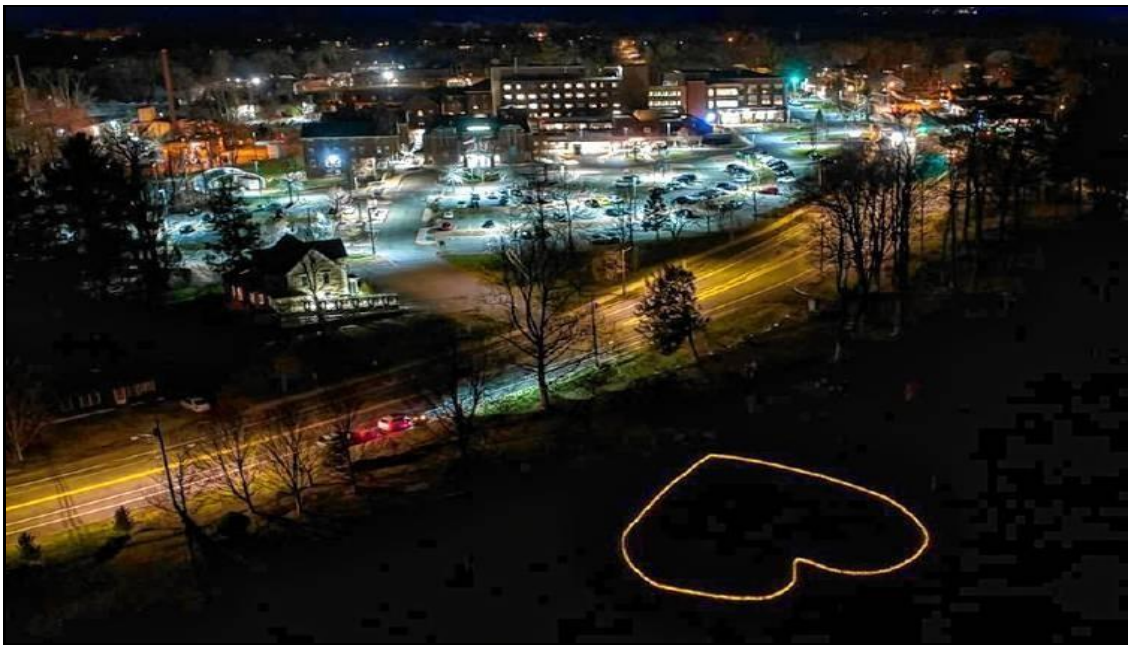
“It’s really a team award,” Sullivan said this week. “It’s really that whole series of people that, A, can investigate, and B, prosecute people here.”

Sullivan also spoke highly of the Nurturing Fathers Program, a 13-week parenting curriculum offered to inmates at the Hampshire County Jail and House of Correction. He said this and similar programs “really fortify a family and help them cope with stress and get resources so it doesn’t become an abusive situation.”

If you even suspect that a child is being abused or neglected, McElhone said, call 911 or the Child-at-Risk Hotline at (800) 792-5200.

“You don’t want to make a mistake by not reporting it,” McElhone said. “It’s not your job to find out if it’s true or not.”

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This photo submitted by the Children's Advocacy Center of Hampshire County shows the April 2021 “This Little Light of Mine” luminaria display at Childs Park in Northampton. Cooley Dickinson Hospital is seen at top. Submitted photo