

Calls to Marion County Children Services drop by 51% during coronavirus pandemic

[Andrew Carter](#), [Marion Star](#) Published 8:34 a.m. ET April 10, 2020



In Marion County, the top three reporters of child-mistreatment claims are, in order, law enforcement, medical professionals, and educational professionals, said Jacqueline Ringer, executive director of Marion County Children Services. (Photo: Hasan Karim/Marion Star)

MARION — Child welfare advocates across the United States have expressed concern about the safety of children during a time when millions of people are being forced to stay at home due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"What we know is when families are under stress, that's when the risk of child maltreatment increases," said Jacqueline Ringer, executive director of [Marion County Children Services](#). "I'll be honest, I'm worried. ... I've been tracking the number of calls that we've received. I took the first week of March and compared it with the fourth week of March (23-27), just comparing pre- and post-social distancing.

"We've seen a decrease of 51 percent in the number of calls coming into our agency."

The Marion Star is making all COVID-19 coverage available for free to our readers. Please consider supporting local journalism by subscribing to the Star at offers.marionstar.com.

Educational professionals (teachers, administrators, school counselors, etc.) report about 20 percent of child-mistreatment claims in the nation, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Other major sources include law enforcement and social workers.

In Marion County, the top three reporters of child-mistreatment claims are, in order, law enforcement, medical professionals, and educational professionals, Ringer said.

With school buildings closed and educators and others outside the family unit having limited engagement with children during the pandemic, experts expect reports to drastically decrease, as they did during March in Marion County, Ringer said. According to HHS, family members account for just 12 percent of child-mistreatment claims.

[Children more at risk for abuse and neglect amid coronavirus pandemic, experts say](#)

"Now I know that child abuse and neglect (in Marion County) has not decreased 51 percent in less than three weeks," said Ringer, a wife and mother of two boys. "I do know that as children are becoming isolated because of social distancing, there's fewer eyes on them. These families are under a great deal of stress. I'm under a great deal of stress, trying to figure how to still do my job and be a mom. It's a tough time and people need help."

Due to social distancing restrictions and closings, families have lost access to many other resources and safety nets, Ringer said.

"When you take into consideration the fact that kids are out of school as well as the before and after school activities — either daycare or Boys and Girls Clubs — when you combine all of them, that's probably nine to 10 hours of a child's life per day," Ringer said. "And now we don't have that. It's extremely concerning. We haven't seen the pitfalls of this yet, but as time goes on and we remain isolated, people become agitated, their resources dwindle, stress increases, yeah, there's a good chance we're going to see more abuse and neglect."

Elizabeth Moore, foster care and community engagement coordinator for Marion County Children Services, has created a [resource guide for families and children](#) that is available on the agency's website and Facebook page.

"Last week on our Facebook page, we posted our Child Protection During COVID-19 document to, hopefully, connect families resources in town and to give people some education about some things they could be or should be doing right now," Moore said. "That's the best resource we have for families right now. We have also started daily posts to highlight what the agency does."

Ringer noted that families can still contact Children Services staff members. There is a [staff listing page](#) on the agency website at [marionkids.com](#) under the Contact Us tab on the homepage. The agency's main telephone number is 740-389-2317. People can also send emails to moreinfo@marionkids.com.

Outreach efforts changed

Get the News Alerts newsletter in your inbox.

Get alerted to the latest stories to stay on top of the news.

Delivery: Varies

Your Email



April is Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Month, which usually means Marion County Children Services is busy with several events to promote awareness in the community, including the popular pinwheel planting at the agency's campus on Marion-Waldo Road. Due to the state's stay at home order, that's not the case in 2020, Moore said.

"We've had to be very creative about how we're connecting with people, with families, with kids, just in general with the community," Moore said. "We did not do our pinwheel planting this year. Normally, our pinwheel planting uses all the agency staff, we bring in kids and families, and do a lot of things that doesn't work for social distancing. So, we had to change what we had planned."

The agency is using social media as its main outreach source during the pandemic.

Want to stay informed about what's happening in our community? [Download our Marion Star app.](#)

"We reached out to our primary service providers and had them do some videos just to get some linkage with people in the community," Ringer said. "Then we took it a step further, trying to encourage family engagement. So, we started doing competitions, focusing on physical health, emotional health, do an appreciation picture for your teacher, just to keep people moving and provide a sense of normalcy."

Ringer said over the nine years since she's been director, the numbers of children the agency serves have continuously increased. In 2019, Children Services served 1 out of 10 children in Marion County and completed 941 safety assessments. She said 150 children were in foster care last year. Each of those figures were the highest totals ever for the agency, Ringer said.

eacarter@marionstar.com

740-375-5154

@AndrewACCarter