PEOPLE

A STATEWIDE COMMITMENT TO PROTECTING MISSISSIPPI'S CHILDREN



story by **Attorney General Lynn Fitch** photo courtesy of **Children's Advocacy Centers of Mississippi**

When a child is abused – physically, mentally, or sexually, the strength and support of their journey through the criminal justice system and their pathway to healing should not depend on where they live. But in Mississippi, it largely has because there has been no uniform best practice guide to help the professionals who work with child abuse victims.

That is changing now with a new Statewide Protocol to Child Abuse Response. This is the result of a collaborative effort between the various professionals who both help children heal from their abuse and serve justice on the abuser. This new protocol will vastly improve our response for all Mississippi children.

After several years of declining numbers, since 2020, child maltreatment in Mississippi is on the rise again. According to the most recent statistics from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, the number of children reported as victims of maltreatment in Mississippi increased from 8,136 in 2020 to 9,028 in 2022. The vast majority – 7,921 of those children – were experiencing abuse or neglect for the very first time. Perhaps most disturbing, infants under the age of one represented the largest group of the abused and child fatalities from maltreatment nearly doubled, climbing from 38 in 2020 to 72 in 2022.

> The rise in cybertips of online child exploitation sent to Mississippi's Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force, which my office runs, demonstrates a similarly alarming trend. From 2020 to 2022, cybertips skyrocketed from 1,860 to 2,936. Last year, it more than doubled again, to 6,306. And already in 2025, we've

received 2,179 tips.

These are not just numbers – these are children. Tiny lives damaged or lost before they even had a chance to truly begin. They have been physically abused, emotionally tormented, neglected, sexually abused, or trafficked – often by the very people who were supposed to protect them. When that trust is shattered, it falls to all of us – to step in and say: We are here.

I have had the honor of working with the Children's Advocacy Centers of Mississippi, Child Protection Services, law enforcement, prosecutors, judges, and other vital stakeholders to develop this Statewide Protocol for Child Abuse Response to provide a consistent, victim-centered approach for all the professionals who work on felony child abuse cases.

Every person in this network brings unique knowledge to the table, and this protocol represents a unified, multidisciplinary approach to child abuse cases. It outlines best practices for professionals across fields to follow – from investigators, prosecutors, and judges to therapists and healthcare providers. Most importantly, it is a blueprint to ensure that every child in every county receives a consistent, child-focused response that shows child-victims that despite all that the abusers took from them, they are loved, valued, respected, and protected.

This is more than just a document. It is a symbol of our commitment – to protect, to heal, to bring justice. It is a promise that no child will be overlooked.

While the Protocol is meant for the professionals who work with child abuse victims, every Mississippian can help put an end to child abuse in Mississippi. If you suspect a child is being abused, report it to 800.222.8000. This line is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. And visit www. AttorneyGeneralLynnFitch.com/cac for more tips to help a child.

This awareness campaign is part of a statewide initiative of Children's Advocacy Centers of Mississippi to educate communities on this important issue.