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Child Fatality Task Force Releases Annual Report and Recommendations

RALEIGH. The North Carolina Child Fatality Task Force (Task Force) has submitted its 2021 annual report to the Governor and the General Assembly containing policy recommendations aimed at reducing child deaths, preventing child abuse and neglect, and supporting the safety and well-being of North Carolina's children.

Recommendations in this year's report cover a range of issues such as:

- Strengthening and restructuring the statewide Child Fatality Prevention System to effectively identify and implement needed changes to prevent child deaths and maltreatment
- Preventing infant deaths associated with unsafe sleep* or perinatal tobacco use
- Strengthening the infant safe surrender law
- Putting more school nurses, social workers, counselors and psychologists in schools to meet the mental health needs of students and prevent youth suicide*
- Launching a two-year statewide firearm safe storage education and awareness initiative*
- Strengthening training of school personnel and others on child abuse and neglect reporting*
- Strengthening laws addressing use of ignition interlocks to prevent impaired driving
- Strengthening workplace supports for families

Several of the 2021 Task Force recommendations originated from the findings of multidisciplinary team reviews of child deaths (noted above with asterisk). Local teams conduct reviews in every county, and the State Child Fatality Prevention Team, led by the Chief Medical Examiner, conducts its own reviews and takes into consideration the results from local reviews in making recommendations to the Task Force.

Task Force work is centered around data and evidence to explain causes of child deaths and inform strategies to prevent deaths. For example, presentations of causal factors and data-driven responses in the meetings allowed the Task Force to identify the following:

- From 2012 to 2018, 911 NC infant deaths were associated with unsafe sleep environments or SIDS; yet North Carolina is currently spending only \$45,000 on safe sleep initiatives.
- In 2019, almost one fifth of NC high school students surveyed said they seriously considered attempting suicide and 36% said they felt sad or hopeless; yet the ratios of school personnel best equipped to support the mental health of students are far below nationally recommended standards.
- From 2010 to 2019, over 460 NC children age 17 and younger died from firearm-related injuries and firearms are used in almost half of youth suicides in NC; yet one NC survey showed 28% of parents keep firearms unlocked, and 2020 brought a surge in gun purchases which elevates the risk of even more guns in homes that are not safely stored.

Task Force meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic included multiple presentations addressing the impact of the pandemic on children and families and circumstances resulting in increased risks and urgency for advancing many Task Force recommendations. "The pandemic has enhanced the visibility of risks and needs for children in North Carolina. The recommendations put forward by the CFTF provide a blueprint for North Carolina state and legislative leaders to make our state a safe and healthy place to raise our children," said Karen McLeod, Chair of the Task Force.

The full 2021 Action Agenda of recommendations and the 2021 CFTF Annual Report that explains the recommendations are available on the website for the Child Fatality Task Force:

<https://www.ncleg.gov/DocumentSites/Committees/NCCFTF/Homepage/index.html>.

The Task Force is a legislative study commission and part of the state's Child Fatality Prevention System, created in 1991. Since 1991, the child death rate has decreased by 49%.