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North Carolina Child Fatality Task Force submits recommendations addressing child health and safety to Governor and General Assembly

RALEIGH – The North Carolina Child Fatality Task Force (Task Force) has submitted its 2018 Annual Report to the Governor and the General Assembly containing recommendations aimed at reducing child deaths, preventing child abuse and neglect, and supporting the safety and well-being of North Carolina’s children.

Many of the 2018 recommendations address youth suicide and access to lethal means. “Data alone related to youth suicide, firearm-related deaths and injuries to kids, and failure to safely store guns would make a compelling case for focusing on these issues,” said Kella Hatcher, Executive Director of the Task Force. “When we combine data with what experts tell us about the need to do so much better at addressing kids’ mental health issues, these recommendations are especially important.” Some of these recommendations are: legislation requiring suicide prevention training for school personnel and a risk referral protocol in schools; funding for more school nurses who spend a third of their time counseling on mental health issues but due to a shortage may only be in a school for one-half day each week; funding to launch a statewide firearm safety initiative focused on education and awareness on the importance of safe storage of guns; and expanding a program in NC that helps counsel families of those at risk for suicide to reduce their loved ones’ access to lethal means.

Deaths to babies under one year of age make up two-thirds of all child deaths. This year the Task Force is seeking to require a study that will address the need to ensure that pregnant mothers and infants with complex needs are able to access facilities in North Carolina that can best meet those needs. Another recommendation focused on babies would add conditions to the state’s newborn screening program to identify and address certain conditions to prevent or reduce the chances of serious illness or deaths to children.

Two of the 2018 recommendations address motor vehicle accidents, which account for the majority of unintentional injury deaths among children. The Task Force seeks to close a gap in the state’s law addressing rear seat seatbelts, and to strengthen a law that requires the use of ignition interlocks for certain driving while impaired offenders. “Both of these recommendations were made based on evidence that strengthening these laws will save lives, and with the knowledge that many states have already embraced these strategies,” said Karen McLeod, Chair of the Task Force.

The Task Force has a history of advancing public policy that addresses prescription drug misuse and the opioid epidemic. This year the Task Force will continue its quest to obtain recurring funding for the state’s very successful safe drug disposal program, Operation Medicine Drop, which addresses the problem of drugs not properly disposed which may end up being misused or discarded in a manner that is not environmentally sound.

Other 2018 recommendations address issues such as tobacco use prevention, youth sports injuries, strengthening NC’s infant safe surrender law, and obtaining quality birth certificate information. The full 2018 Action Agenda and the 2018 Annual Report are available on the website for the Child Fatality Task Force:

<http://www.ncleg.net/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 45%. The latest child death data was released by the Task Force in October, 2017.