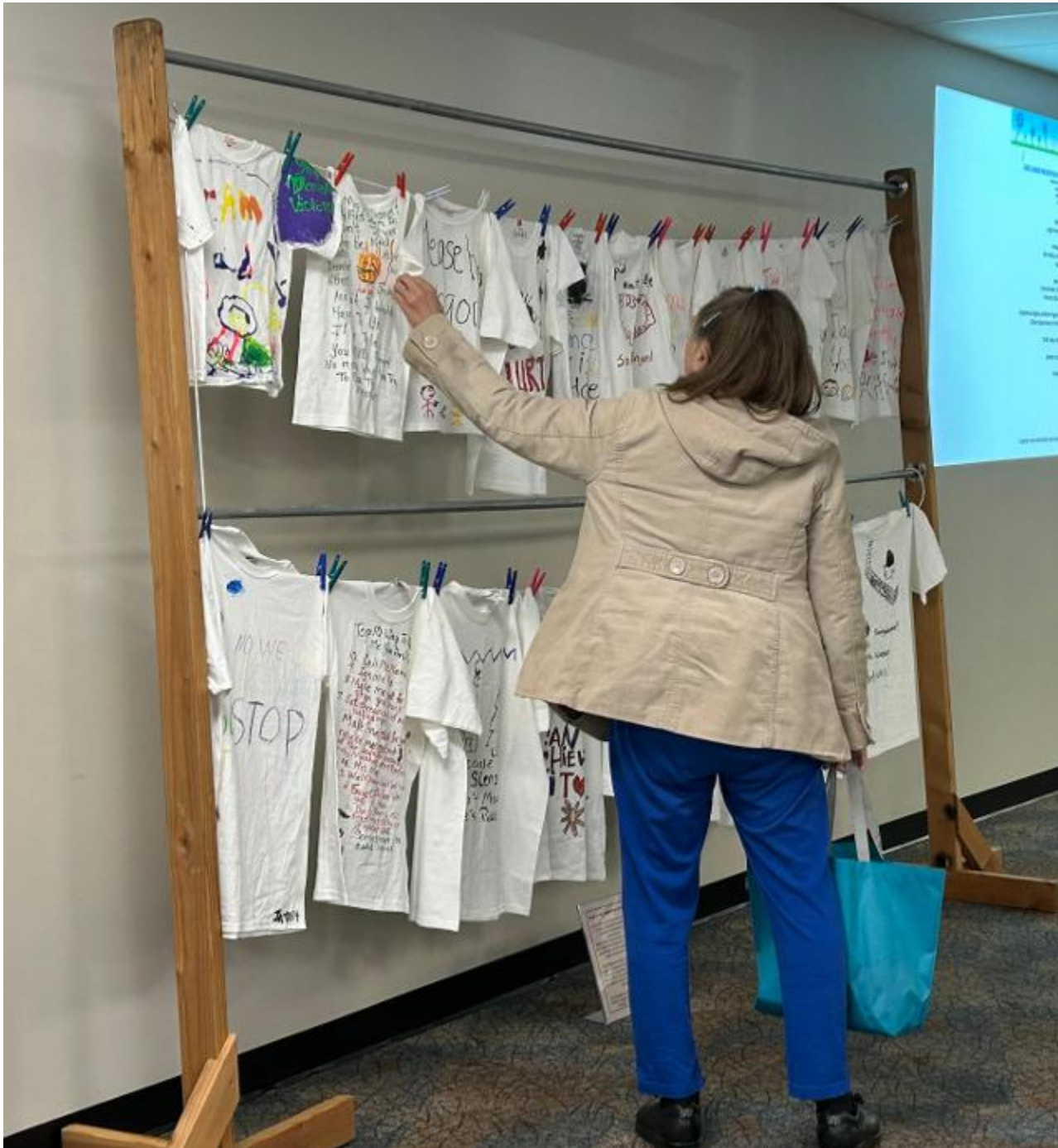


Community Leaders Gather for Child Abuse Prevention Month Kickoff Event

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter
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WOOD RIVER - Community members gathered at Riverbend Family Ministries for a conference about Child Abuse Prevention Month.

On Friday, April 5, 2024, multiple organizations and speakers noted the importance of spotting and reporting child abuse. They also talked about the value of a competent and caring adult in a child's life.

"We plant pinwheels, we tie ribbons, we organize trainings, and we host fundraisers and other activities to celebrate healthy, happy childhoods and raise awareness that all children deserve to grow up in nurturing and safe homes," said Judge Maureen Schuette.

Erin Bickle, the Executive Director of Refuge, read a proclamation from Governor J.B. Pritzker that recognizes April as Child Abuse Prevention Month in Illinois. Tarra Winters, the Executive Director of Prevent Child Abuse Illinois, emphasized that everyone has a responsibility to promote primary prevention and stop abuse before it occurs. She said we do this by connecting families with resources and support.

"As adults, it is our responsibility to protect children," Winters said. "We must be willing to have difficult and uncomfortable conversations about preventing child abuse and neglect and be part of the solution. It is also our responsibility to create positive experiences for children, build protective factors that strengthen families and advocate for and promote programs that put children first."

Stephanie Grigsby, the Southern Regional Administrator for the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), said that DCFS received over 230,000 calls to their hotline at 800-25-ABUSE (800-252-2873) in 2023. They secured permanent homes for 5,374 children last year.

She said DCFS also supported 4,089 families "by connecting parents to resources like crisis intervention, parenting skills classes and counseling programs." She noted that some families simply need support, and organizations like DCFS and the others represented at the Child Abuse Prevention Month kickoff event can provide these resources.

Schuette said there were 749 kids in foster or other care placement in the Third Judicial Circuit, which comprises Madison County and Bond County, as of the end of March 2024. Chief Judge Stephen Stobbs noted that judges in the Third Judicial Circuit see a "vast number of these cases," but going forward, they hope to have one judge focus solely on such cases. He also thanked the people at the event for their work.

"We all need each other to get these cases right," he added. "There's just too many cases and there's too few resources. Without each and every one of you doing what you're

doing, these cases are even more difficult. Ultimately what we want to do from the court standpoint is just get the right result. And we rely heavily on the work that you do each and every day to give us the information that we need in order to get the right result.”

State Senator Erica Harriss shared the DCFS reporting website at [ChildAbuse.Illinois.gov](https://www.childabuseillinois.gov). She encouraged anyone who suspects abuse to visit this website and make a report.

“Child abuse, we know, comes in many forms,” she said. “It can happen in any community. So if we think that this is not happening right here in our community, we’re wrong...We must teach our children about their rights. We must empower them to speak up if they’re feeling unsafe. We also need to educate parents, caregivers and communities about the signs of abuse and how to intervene in these instances.”

Schuetz closed the event with a few statistics, noting that neglect is the most common form of child abuse at 76% of cases, followed by physical abuse at 16%. She thanked [Prevent Child Abuse Illinois](#), [DCFS](#), the [Third Judicial Circuit Family Violence Prevention Council](#), [Madison County Child Advocacy Center](#), [Refuge](#), [Riverbend Family Ministries](#), [Oasis Women’s Center](#) and the [Children First Foundation](#) for their help.

If you or someone you know is experiencing child abuse, or if you have concerns about the safety and well-being of a child, you can reach out for help. In the United States, the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline is available at 1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453) for confidential support. Additionally, you can contact the national suicide hotline at 988 if you are in crisis. Remember, taking action can protect children and save lives.

