

Staggering tragedies ... without a clear plan': Citing rise in child fatalities, coalition for children and families urges state leaders to take action

By [Amanda Milkovits](#) Boston Globe Staff, Updated April 16, 2024, 7:32 p.m.

PROVIDENCE — The [Rhode Island Coalition for Children and Families](#) is calling on Governor Daniel McKee and the General Assembly to immediately respond to a rise in child fatalities and near fatalities in Rhode Island.

The state Department of Children, Youth, and Families announced on Monday that it was seeing an increase in the deaths and near-deaths of children, and leaders of the state departments of Health and Human Services implored families to take advantage of resources to help keep children safe.

On Tuesday, the coalition urged the governor and state legislators to invest in resources to help children and families access social, mental health, and substance use support services.

“The safety and well-being of our children and youth are at grave risk, and the collective challenges they face demand immediate attention,” Tanja Kubas-Meyer, the executive director of RICCF, said in a statement. “For children facing adverse circumstances such as poverty, exposure to violence, mental health, or substance use crises, having access to crisis response and ongoing supportive services can be the difference between life and death.”

There were 28 deaths and 28 near-deaths of children and youth under 21 years old between 2019 and 2023, according to the Office of the Child Advocate. There were 14 near deaths and 10 deaths of children from June 2023 to Monday, according to DCYF.

The ages range from infants to adolescents, and the causes were diverse. The coalition said that the contributing factors include substance abuse, mental health needs, interpersonal violence, housing instability, unsafe sleep practices, and firearms.

“I witness firsthand the despair and hopelessness that many of the youth we serve are grappling with,” said Lauri Smalls, executive director of Turning the Corner Residential Treatment Programs, and vice chair of the board of the coalition for children and families. “The urgency for intervention and support cannot be overstated. We must act swiftly and decisively to provide these young individuals with the necessary resources and assistance to overcome their challenges and find hope for the future.”

A spokeswoman for McKee said Tuesday that he appreciates the coalition’s concerns and commitment to the wellbeing of children. “Connecting families to the many, accessible resources available to keep children healthy and safe is a top priority,” Olivia Darocha said in an email.

She pointed to a press conference held by DCYF director Ashley Deckert on Monday about resources available to help families, such as DCYF’s support and response unit to connect families to support services, and the Health Department’s free family supports for families that are expecting or have young babies or children at home.

“I have been a child advocate in Rhode Island for decades, and never before have I witnessed such a staggering number of tragedies without a clear plan of action to prevent further harm,” said Darlene Allen, CEO and executive director of Adoption RI, and chairperson of the board of R.I. Coalition for Children and Families.

The coalition said the governor, agency directors, and state leaders should develop an action plan, with input from policymakers, state agencies, academic and research institutions, medical professionals, experts, people with lived experiences, and community service providers, to address the causes of the tragedies.

“We’ve reached a critical juncture where the tragic deaths of children have become all too common, and it’s clear that we’ve grown numb to these heartbreaking losses,” said Margaret Holland McDuff, president and CEO of Family Service of Rhode Island and Government Relations Committee Chair of the coalition for children and families. “The fraying of our children’s well-being safety net has reached a point where children are falling through the cracks in the system, leading to disastrous outcomes. We must confront this reality head-on and take urgent action to rebuild and strengthen our systems of support for Rhode Island’s children and families.”