



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Timothy M. Kennedy

## Protecting Children Must Remain Priority for All

TIMOTHY M. KENNEDY November 26, 2013

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By SENATOR TIM KENNEDY

In September, Western New York was once again rocked by the tragic loss of a young child. Five-year-old Eain Clayton Brooks suffered repeated, brutal beatings allegedly at the hands of his mother's live-in boyfriend. Eain's life was taken as a result of this senseless abuse.

As the father of three young children, I was deeply saddened by Eain's death. Our entire community has mourned his loss, and I cannot imagine the immense pain that Eain's family

has endured. My thoughts and prayers remain with them.

Eain's death is an intolerable and heartbreaking tragedy, and we must do all we can to prevent anything like this from ever happening again.

Unfortunately, that is an all too common refrain. Clearly, the system is susceptible to improvement. We can do better. We must.

In Western New York alone, over the past several months, 10-year-old Abdifatah Mohamud, three-year-old Gage Seneca, one-year-old Austin Smith and now five-year-old Eain Clayton Brooks were brutally beaten and killed allegedly by individuals entrusted with their care. The circumstances surrounding each of their deaths are different, but together, the loss of these children call into question whether or not our county and state are meeting their obligations to protect the safety and well-being of all children.

That's why we called in the New York State Office of Children and Family Services and asked them to investigate the practices and procedures of Erie County Child Protective Services.

The state has completed the first part of its investigative review and has issued a critical report outlining areas in urgent need of improvement. OCFS is now working to complete the second-phase of the review. This process is ongoing, and we will keep the community informed as we learn more.

The first part of the state's review shed light on gaps in the system and presented initial opportunities to reform child protective services.

We have begun working to draft legislation that will help ensure all children are kept safe from harm. We want accountability, transparency and responsiveness within child protective services locally and throughout the state, and we are committed to pursuing

legislative reform to ensure that happens as quickly as possible.

Child abuse has become a nationwide epidemic. It's a problem that has touched every town, city and village – and not just in Erie County, but across the state and nation as well.

Across the country, about 700,000 children have been the victims of abuse or neglect in each of the last several years. One child abused or neglected is enough to spark outrage, but 700,000 children – that is absolutely unacceptable and utterly appalling. Each year, child abuse and neglect tragically claim far too many young lives. An estimated 1,570 children died from abuse and neglect in 2011, according to the Child Welfare Information Gateway.

Child abuse needs to end, and it needs to end now. In Western New York, we have a history of fighting hard to pass stronger laws to protect children and prevent child abuse. And the success we've had in reforming state law has been the result of the widespread community support that has fueled our efforts.

As a community, we worked relentlessly to get Jay-J's Law finally passed into law this year. With the dedication of Jay-J's family and an outpouring of help from the community, the bill received legislative approval and became law. It toughens penalties for repeat child abuse, and it ensures children, especially those who have become victims of child abuse, have enhanced protections against their violent abusers.

When Governor Cuomo signed this important bill into law, we knew our work was not done. We, as a community, need to remain diligent in our efforts to stop child abuse and neglect. Our state needs even stronger penalties against abusers, a more responsive system of child protective services and new initiatives to prevent child abuse before it happens.

Eain's family has formed a group called Eain's Echo, which will help raise awareness of child abuse and aims to ramp up prevention efforts. This past weekend, the family held the first-

ever Eain's Echo Child Abuse Awareness Walk. After suffering an unimaginable tragedy, they are channeling their immense grief into positive action to prevent other families from experiencing what they've endured. Amid all of their pain, they are working hard to inspire the community to help them prevent child abuse and neglect.

Let's remain steadfast and resolute in our ongoing work to end child abuse, once and for all. Children in Western New York and across New York State are depending us.

*This column was first published in the Cheektowaga Bee on October 24, 2013.*