

## **JFS hopes to raise awareness through walk**

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LANCASTER - One local social service agency is again shedding light on an serious problem - child abuse and neglect. It is a problem that officials say is escalating.

Fairfield County Job & Family Services now receives an average of 277 calls per month concerning children who have been or are at risk of being exploited and mistreated, Child Protective Services Director Rich Bowlen said. That number is up significantly compared with the average of 187 calls a month this time in 2007.

But officials say residents can help stomp out child abuse by participating in the 7th Annual Candlelight Walk on Thursday.

The purpose of the event - which coincides with National Child Abuse Prevention Month - is to bring light to the lives of abused and neglected children in Fairfield County and to offer hope to those victims.

"This is an opportunity for the community to demonstrate its commitment to ensuring that our children healthy, happy, strong and safe," Bowlen said.

Prior to the walk, residents are invited to the agency's annual Circus Night, a family event that begins at 5 p.m. in the parking lot of Job and Family Services building, 239 W. Main St. The procession starts at the JFS building and continues to the Zane Square gazebo, on the corner of Main and Broad streets in downtown Lancaster.

Participants will carry 277 candles representing the average number of calls Child Protective Services receives each month.

"As long as that flame is alive, there is hope," Bowlen said. The gazebo will be aglow from the illumination of 196 tea lights, one for each child in placement, he explained. "It's a powerful visual (that) increases awareness and (puts) a real face on the issue," Bowlen said.

The event will feature live entertainment and a keynote address by Lancaster Police Chief Dave Bailey, whom Bowlen describes as a passionate advocate for child welfare issues.

"Chief Bailey really has been a godsend to this community. He frequently calls me to ask what he and the department can do to make Lancaster a safer place for children (and families) to live. His commitment and passion is unparalleled," Bowlen said.

Bailey said he is happy to lend his time and support to such a noble cause.

"It is important that law enforcement works closely with Child Protective Services and the Child Advocacy Center to ensure that victims of abuse are given the best (care) possible, and those abusers are quickly arrested and brought to justice," he said.