

Viewpoints

Understanding the annual child fatality and near fatality report

During their July meeting, members of the Interim Joint Committee on Families and Children reviewed the most recent annual report compiled by the Child Fatality and Near Fatality External Review Panel. This panel was established in 2013 by the General Assembly to provide the Commonwealth with robust information related to cases of death or near death of a child that are suspected to be the result of abuse or neglect. Since 2021, the panel has provided annual reports and updates to the Legislative Oversight and Investigations Committee, and has presented to the Interim Joint Committee on Families and Children since its inception in 2022.



SAMARA HEAVRIN

The 2025 annual report, reflects a review of child welfare cases from the 2024 fiscal year. The first key finding of the panel was that children four years old or younger are at the highest risk of abuse or neglect, totaling 82% of the cases. Children under the age of one comprised 44% of the panel's cases alone.

INGESTION OF ILLICIT OR HARMFUL SUBSTANCES

The panel found that cases of overdose or ingestion continue to rise, year over year. In FY 23 there were 76 such cases, but in FY 24 this number had risen to 98. These children were commonly ingesting substances such as cannabinoids (28%), fentanyl (19%), methamphetamines (16%), and amphetamines (10%). Of the 98 children, 11 lost their lives due to overdose and ingestion of dangerous or illicit substances.

During the 2026 Regular Session, the General Assembly passed House Bill 778 into law, which strengthened the commonwealth's approach to inhalation and ingestion cases. This law added ingestion and inhalation to the criminal abuse or neglect statutes, classifying these events as Class A misdemeanors. Additionally, the legislation directs state employees across several cabinets to receive training and education services on pediatric ingestion and inhalation of controlled substances. These changes should help our commonwealth curb the rise of child overdose and ingestion.

PLAN OF SAFE CARE

Plans of Safe Care are designed to protect infants from prenatal exposure to harmful

drugs and substances. In fiscal year 2024, there was a decrease of substance exposed infants, but an increase in infants with Neonatal Opioid Withdrawal Syndrome. Overall, 741 cases were reported through the Kentucky Public Health Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome, which is a decrease from the previous year's total of 792. There has been a 30% increase in prenatal cannabinoid exposure. Roughly, 76% of all in utero drug exposure involved cannabinoids, followed by methamphetamines and amphetamines (43%) and Buprenorphine and Methadone (35%).

PHYSICAL ABUSE

The Commonwealth saw an increase in physical abuse cases from 42 in fiscal year 2023 to 55. Both years involved 13 fatalities, but in FY 24 there were 42 near fatality cases. The panel found that the families involved often had preexisting Department of Community Based Services (DCBS) issues (49), financial issues (45), or many others including substance abuses in the home (37).

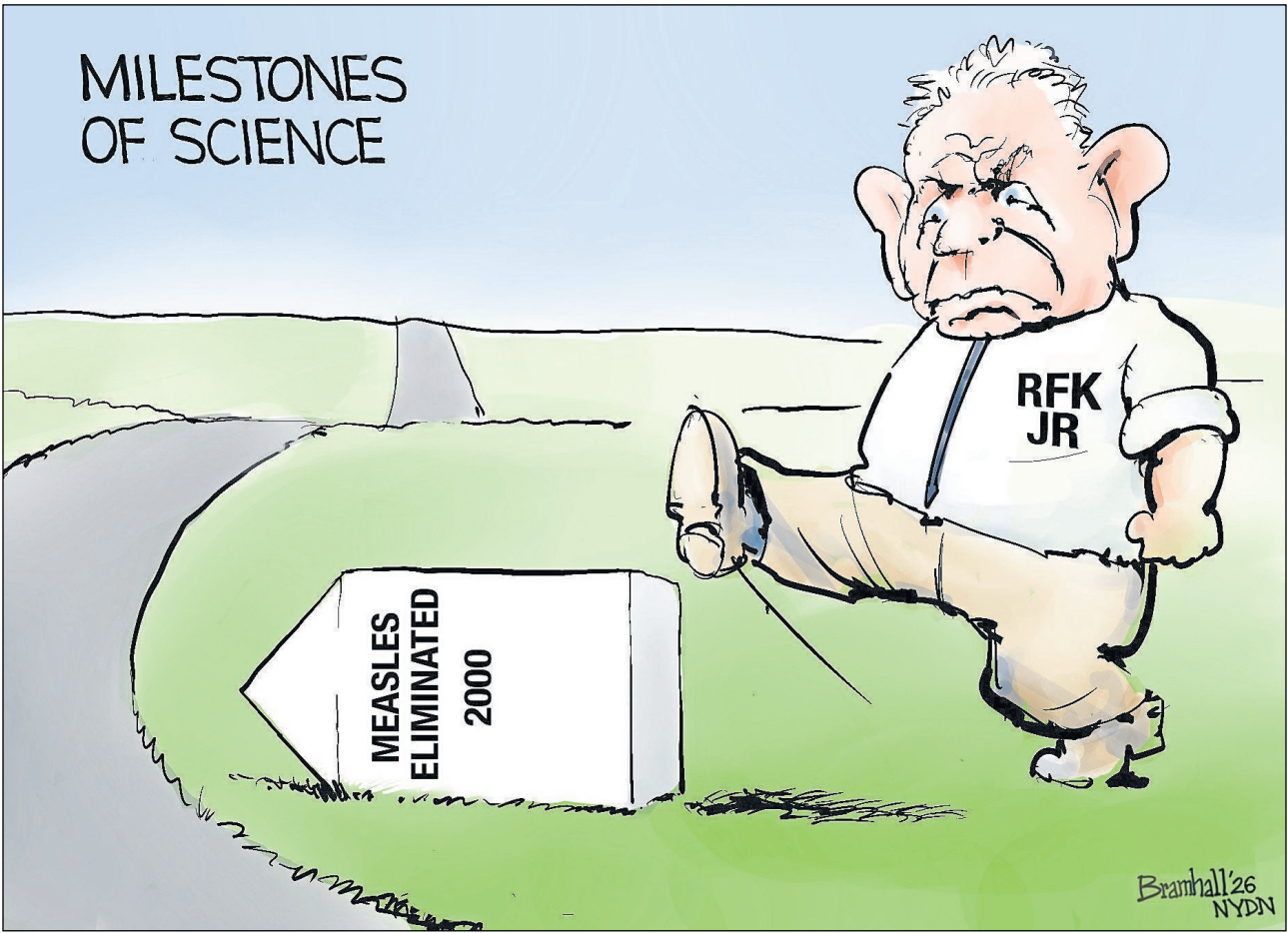
The panel recommends that child welfare staff and medical providers receive additional training on the indicators of physical abuse to better identify cases before they escalate to fatality or near fatality. Additionally, they recommend that DCBS implement a monitoring system to track case work compliance with standard operating practices.

The 2025 Child Fatality and Near Fatality External Review Panel report can be found with the committee's meeting materials at <https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/CommitteeDocuments/369/>.

These reports help the General Assembly create legislation to better serve Kentucky families and protect our kids. While the contents of the reports are often tragic and heartbreaking, they are an important reminder that there is much more work to be done in our communities from legislative approaches to the way programs are implemented at a local, district, and regional level.

As always, I can be reached anytime through the toll-free message line in Frankfort at 1-800-372-7181. You can also contact me via email at Samara.Heavrin@kylegisla-

ture.gov and keep track through the Kentucky legislature's website at legislature.ky.gov.



McConnell's hospital stay highlights need for term limits

BY EMILY BURTON SHERMAN

The elected voice of a people must serve as a faithful and robust echo of their constituents' best interests over ego, party and power. A public servant who has forgotten this fact has no right to continue leaching this power from their voters, only to inevitably turn it against citizens' best interests in favor of grift and legislative immortality.

For decades, the power of Sen. Mitch McConnell has benefited anyone but the working parents and their children in Kentucky. During his long tenure his ear has turned more often towards his special friends with the influence to repay his favors, while everyday Kentuckians find themselves skipping meals and medicine to pay exorbitant, inflated housing costs.

In a commonwealth that ranks 36th in the nation for child welfare and 45th for economic strength, one would hope its long-standing, powerful voice in the Senate would remember his roots and honor his sacred duty to his constituents. Instead, McConnell has squandered his long tenure on party politics, power grabs, and now the public farce surrounding his latest hospital disappearance.

Those who entrusted McConnell with their

vote for so many years found themselves without a voice for weeks, their ballot power squandered on an ailing man who serves his party more than the people who sent him to Washington.

The senator's latest medical issues only highlight the overdue necessity of Congressional term limits. At the very least, senators should not be allowed to drop out of the public spotlight for weeks at a time without explanation or clear proof of cognitive capacity.

Long ago President John Adams likened government and its officers as trustees, "created for the benefit of the people." Is McConnell benefiting the people of Kentucky by serving well into his 80s while beset by health concerns? Bluegrass voters deserve a senator who can speak on the people's behalf as opposed to one who refutes his own mortality.

As Trump professed in 2016, "I have no patience for injustice, no tolerance for government incompetence, no sympathy for leaders who fail their citizens." Yet last week the man who holds the nation's nuclear codes admitted to having no idea how McConnell was faring. This is diametrically opposed to his previous disavowment of government incompetence and failed leadership. It also greatly undermines his leadership prowess among his own party. The lead dog

who doesn't know if he's pulling dead weight is willfully ignorant of his place in the pack.

"Whether we or our politicians know it or not, Nature is party to all our deals and decisions, and she has more votes, a longer memory, and a sterner sense of justice than we do," wrote the incomparable Kentucky author Wendell Berry. Nature's justice has finally come for Mitch McConnell after his many years deposing the people's will. Yet his office, in hiding his serious health struggles, has subverted the red, white, and blue-blooded right of all Kentuckians to have an elected representative in Congress. Those voters who show up each day for their shifts, their kids, and their communities deserve a representative in Washington who does the same for them.

As it stands, Kentucky will continue to slip behind the rest of the nation while it languishes under the miasma of McConnell's personal power games. Under McConnell's leadership, Kentucky has already fallen nine places to 35th in the nation in health-care and education, as recently reported by a Consumer Affairs study.

As Liz McQuillen, chief policy officer at Metro United Way of Louisville, pointed out in The Lantern in January, "Together, child care and housing shortages are constraining economic

growth, straining families, employers, and public systems alike." Is this the Kentucky McConnell hoped to create when first elected in 1984?

Now is not the time for struggling Kentucky families to sit idly by while political elites hold their votes hostage in hopes of one man's miraculous immortality. Only one man has risen from the dead, and despite what AI images on Truth Social would have us believe, he isn't in the White House. Nor is he a Kentucky senator.

It's time Kentucky voters demand more of their senators than warm bodies. We must have term limits in Congress to ensure fair and equal representation as elected officials continue to push the limits of physical competency. Kentucky frontiersmen once fought like wildcats for their place in the nation, for the right to elect their own stalwart representation in the face of a king, and that buckskin spirit still runs deep in the Bluegrass, even if it's been lost in Washington.

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Celebrate farmers market week Aug. 2-8

Once a week in the summertime, brightly colored 10x10 tents pop up in a corner parking lot in my community. Under each one of those tents is a producer, crafter, or small business owner who has tables of goods for sale.

We celebrate these farmers markets during National Farmers Market Week, Aug. 2 to 8, 2026. My farmers market often includes fruits and vegetables, prepared food, arts and crafts, cut flowers, baked goods, and

handcrafted items. I tend to go for the fresh potatoes, green spinach, juicy red tomatoes, and I might pick up a handcrafted bar of soap or jar of jelly.

These events not only offer locally grown and created items, but they are an important gathering place for the community.

Did you know that humans have been buying and selling farm-fresh food (and more) at markets for thousands of years?

In North America, Indigenous peoples estab-

lished vast trading networks, exchanging food and other goods with neighboring Tribes and then European traders, setting the stage for permanent markets.

The first recorded "farmers market" in the U.S. opened in 1634 in Boston. Others soon followed.

In the 1800s, markets became fewer and farther between as transportation improved. However, in the mid-1900s, as families sought extra income and self-sufficiency, more markets popped up. Today, that number is growing.

In 2026, there are 8,863

U.S. Department of Agriculture-listed farmers markets, plus CSA (community supported agriculture) programs and farm stands, according to Mendeley Data. Counting smaller, seasonal, or newly established local community stands, estimates are as high as 10,000.

This rising number represents a growing interest in "local" — preserving local farmland, protecting the livelihood of local growers, and diversifying local economies.

What will you buy from your farmers market this week?

QUOTE OF THE DAY

"Only the wisest and stupidest of men never change."
-Confucius