

# Coronavirus and child welfare: Our forgotten front line

By Michael Loo

In our nation's darkest moments there are everyday warriors who rise and act. We've witnessed this over the course of history, and it is happening again today in the middle of this global pandemic. We easily, and rightfully, praise doctors, nurses, firefighters and police officers for risking their safety. But there are others on the front lines of health and human services who are often forgotten — the child welfare workers.

Traditionally known as professional child welfare workers — social workers, caseworkers, clinical therapists, youth care workers — we call them social change warriors.

During the last several weeks of sheltering in place, I have spoken with many of these frontline workers as they navigate familiar challenges in an unfamiliar world. I've heard stories from our caseworkers and direct care staff who, despite masks and distancing when possible, know they are putting themselves at risk. But they don't stop. They continue their work because they know that now more than ever, their presence is the difference between life and death for many children.

Our current crisis is a critical time for children at risk. It presents a familiar pattern of increased stress on families — emotionally, financially, mentally. Added to that stress is the reduced visibility of children by teachers, medical professionals, and others who normally are in a position to see and report signs of suspected abuse and neglect. We know that the challenges our society now faces lead to increased violence against children that can be hidden due to reduced visibility and public interaction.



**Children head home on March 13 after the last day of school before it closed due to the coronavirus outbreak, outside Russell Elementary School in Moscow, Idaho. With teachers unable to report suspected cases of abuse and neglect, child welfare agencies have lost some of their best eyes and ears during a highly stressful time for families locked down together at home.** [GEOFF CRIMMINS/THE MOSCOW-PULLMAN DAILY NEWS VIA AP/FILE]

That is where frontline social change warriors come in. When an abused or neglected child needs a protector, a navigator, a servant leader, these workers step in and meet children right where they are physically and emotionally. They do it because they know they are needed. They continue to serve because they know that if they don't, a different kind of pandemic will take hold — one that puts our nation's next generation at risk.

These vital public servants should be held in the same esteem as law enforcement, firefighters and emergency medical personnel. They make life-changing decisions with every telephone call, in-person visit or virtual visit with a child. The trauma they witness and work to combat is complex.

Texas can take action to support our unseen frontline heroes in both policy and practice.

First, designate the exceptional professionals of our child welfare workforce as the first responders they

truly are. In some cases, they are the only responders.

Second, when the widespread testing necessary to fully reopen our economy becomes available, make sure these heroes who are protecting our children are at the front of the line with other first responders and medical professionals.

Third, create strategies for optimizing the supply of personal protective equipment such as N95 masks, and explore innovative solutions to challenges like contact tracing where those serving at-risk children may be positioned to play an important supporting role.

We are grateful for all those on the front lines who are too often forgotten — our child welfare warriors working to break the cycle of child abuse. Let's give the gratitude and support these individuals truly deserve.

*Loo is president and CEO of Upbring, an Austin-based nonprofit working to break the cycle of child abuse throughout Texas.*