While changes to protect children have been made, more work remains

Eain Clayton Brooks should still be alive, given the number of people who tried desperately to help him.

Erie County social workers responded as many as six times to a West Side home where the boy lived.

A horrifying fatality report by the state Office of Children and Family Services gives the hard facts. Each time a social worker asked about possible signs the boy had been abused, his mother, Nora D. Brooks, had a ready excuse absolving her boyfriend, Matthew W. Kuzdzal. He was not abusive to her son, nor did she abuse the boy, she repeatedly said. The marks? Accidents.

Several adults tried to intervene, including social workers, relatives and officials at Gateway-Longview, where Eain had attended a preschool program for developmentally challenged children.

At one point, the boy’s maternal grandmother asked a Child Protective Services caseworker whether Eain would have to die before action was taken.

The little boy’s life ended at age 5. Kuzdzal last fall was convicted in Erie County of second-degree murder and predatory sexual conduct in Eain’s death. The 27-year-old Kuzdzal was sentenced to 50 years in prison.

The state’s report requires new measures by county CPS workers to more thoroughly investigate complaints of child abuse.

Little Eain was not the only child failed by the system. Jacob Noe, 8, was killed, allegedly by his mother, Jessica L. Murphy, last May. Ten-year-old Abdifatah “Abdi” Mohamud died in 2012 after his stepfather beat him more than 70 times over the head with a wooden rolling pin. Ali-Mohamed Mohamud is now serving 25 years to life in prison. Jay J. Bolvin was left brain-damaged by his father, Jeremy Bolvin, who served just three years in prison for the crime.

Their stories have served as a catalyst for change. The governor signed into law an important reform to Child Protective Services, co-sponsored by Sen. Timothy Kennedy, D-Buffalo, and Assemblywoman Crystal Peoples-Stokes, D-Buffalo.

Reports of abuse are now more thorough and caseworkers are better trained. Erie County Executive Mark C. Poloncarz has shaken up Child Protective Services and hired dozens of new caseworkers.

Legislative measures are important, but they are only one piece of the puzzle. Women have to know
where they can go to escape an abusive relationship.

Child & Family Services Haven House (http://www.cfsbny.org/programs/haven-house/), Jewish Family Services of Buffalo and Erie County (http://www.jfsbuffalo.org/), WomanFocus (http://preventionfocus.org/womanfocus.html) and many churches and church coalitions serve victims of domestic violence. For emergency stays, women can head to community missions.

There has not been enough of a dedicated institutional response to this issue. More dollars could be allocated to protecting children and their mothers from abusers. The city, county or state could allocate discretionary funds toward these services.

Hard budget decisions have to be made but when children are dying, it may be time to reorder priorities.