

A cutout on the steps of the Children's Advocacy Center in Hammond reminds guests of the challenges children of abuse can face while in state care. The center held an open house in March to announce the establishment of the Sex Offender Task Force.

Grantmaking

Healing place

Center embraces children of abuse

By Maggie Heyn Richardson | Photos by Tim Mueller

Joelle Henderson's job would make most shudder. At the Children's Advocacy Center in Hammond, Henderson sits across a simple office table from a child who has come forward to report sexual abuse, and she listens intently as the tragic story unfolds. The two are alone, but

authorities from law enforcement and the state Office of Community Services watch the interview on closed-circuit television, sometimes communicating with Henderson via the small listening device in her ear.

The young victim describes how, when and where the incident happened, slowly divulging details that would trigger shock and outrage in most people.

They do in Henderson as well.

However, as the agency's director of clinical services and a veteran forensic interviewer, she sublimates those feelings for an important purpose. Her role is to conduct an interview thorough

enough to keep the young victim from having to be questioned again. The interview is recorded so that a child does not have to take the witness stand.

Last year, the center and its three satellite offices conducted more than 400 interviews, almost all of them with children who were the victims of sexual

abuse. Before the establishment of CACs nationwide, such children would have had to tell their stories multiple times, often in settings that provoked anxiety. The repeated questioning led many children to perceive they were saying something wrong to the many adults who interrogated them. Some changed their stories or even recanted.

"It's so important that these children are interviewed in a way that's not invasive or threatening, and for their story to be preserved so they don't have to tell it over and over again," Henderson says. "I never saw myself doing this, but I really believe in it."

Hammond's Children's Advocacy Center was

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founded in 2002, and its work has had a tremendous impact. The interviews recorded have protected children from being “revictimized” by a historically insensitive system and have led to a 74% prosecution rate, says Rob Carlisle, CEO of the umbrella nonprofit Child Advocacy Services, which also houses the area’s CASA program. The two programs address various aspects of abuse and neglect for families, including advocacy, clinical services and prevention.

Operating with a \$1.2 million budget, the umbrella nonprofit has eight regional offices and serves 10 southeast Louisiana parishes: Ascension, Assumption, East and West Feliciana, Livingston, St. Charles, St. Helena, St. James, St. John, and Tangipahoa.

CASA provides advocacy for child victims as their abuse cases go to court. Meanwhile, the Children’s Advocacy Center not only conducts forensic interviews, it provides clinical services that help children recover and move forward from abuse. The agency’s prevention education initiatives reduce rates of abuse and neglect and offer hope to children who feel shame and humiliation.

“Child sexual abuse is a huge issue—an epidemic—

right now,” says Carlisle.

According to the national “Darkness to Light” initiative, one in four girls and one in six boys are sexually abused before they turn 18. There are more than 39 million adult survivors of abuse, reports the program.

“Families are fragmented and there are often a lot more adults in a child’s life than there were before,” says Carlisle. “It’s a tough situation, but it’s important for these children to understand there is a future for them.”

Thus, once the forensic interview concludes, the CAC’s focus on the child shifts to healing. A child advocate guides the family through therapy options, including individual, group or family counseling. The services are free to any family referred to the center.

Therapy often happens in modes specifically designed for children. In December 2008, the CAC’s Hammond facility unveiled a new Outdoor Play Therapy Center, which provides abuse victims a setting of solace and enjoyment, says Carlisle. Designed to be peaceful rather than rambunctious, the area includes a playhouse and natural features that give chil-

The Northshore Community Foundation granted \$13,500 to underwrite the playground that doubles as a therapy space at the Children's Advocacy Center in Hammond.



dren a chance to relax and work with counselors on the multitude of issues they are facing.

“There is nothing like the freedom of expression. A private outdoor environment can really begin the healing process,” he says.

The Outdoor Play Therapy Center was dedicated to a boy from Pontchatoula named “Rey Rey,” the victim of Shaken Baby Syndrome as an infant. He died in 2008 at age 9.

Rey Rey had been born healthy. At four weeks old he was experiencing colic, and cried frequently. He was shaken so severely by an adult caregiver that doctors were surprised he survived. From then on, Rey Rey was in a vegetative state. He was deaf, blind, required a feeding tube and had no ability to regulate his temperature.

Rey Rey’s case went to court in 1999. It was assigned to Child Advocacy Services CASA volunteer, Tara Peltier.

Peltier says she was so moved by the case, she be-

came involved as a board member with Child Advocacy Services. Her board term now over, Peltier is volunteering on the organization’s Shaken Baby Syndrome campaign, which encourages parents to “take a break, don’t shake.”

“It’s a very preventable form of abuse,” says Peltier. “Most of the people who do it have never committed abuse before. That’s why prevention education is so important.”

All of Child Advocacy Services’ prevention programs, along with its advocacy and clinical services, are designed with one constituent in mind: children.

“The abuse of children is uncomfortable to talk about. But it’s out there. It happens,” says Carlisle. “The important thing is to address it in a way that helps a child heal and move forward. These children are going to be adults, and we want them to live healthy, productive and fulfilling lives.” •