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CHILD ABUSE is incredibly disturbing, difficult to grasp and frustrating because of the feeling of helplessness one feels when dealing with the issue. Most of us have a hard time fitting acts of violence and neglect into the secure life we've built for ourselves. The picture of the American Dream doesn't jibe with the ugliness of child abuse and neglect, so it's often easier to bury the ugly picture in the background of our mind and keep the pretty "American Dream" hanging openly in the front of our consciousness. Yet, child abuse is everyone's problem and is impacting our families, schools, government and penal system.

According to Texas Child Protective Services (CPS), for every 1,000 children living in Texas there are 42 allegations of abuse. There were over 61,000 confirmed cases of child abuse in the state during the previous fiscal year. In Collin County 3,855 allegations of child abuse were made and over 900 cases confirmed, almost three a day. As the population of Collin County continues to grow, there is an increased need for competent and caring individuals to handle the growing number of abuse cases. The above numbers represent a growth in child abuse allegations of 90 percent in Collin County.

A child suffering from abuse or neglect is 67 times more likely to become a juvenile offender. It follows that a strong intervention not only protects a victim from further abuse, but also makes the most sense for a community desiring to curtail a cycle of violence and neglect. The Collin County Children's Advocacy Center (CCCAC) is a non-profit agency that "takes action to identify, protect and improve the lives of abused and neglected Collin County Children" (CCCAC website).

IN THE BEGINNING

The Children's Advocacy Center is the brainchild of Alabama Congressman Bud Cramer. Congressman Cramer served as a district attorney before his election

of the Center is for a survivor of abuse to have a safe place to tell the details of the abuse they suffered.

Bud Cramer proposed housing each agency involved in investigating child abuse under the same roof, allowing a victim to recount a nightmare of abuse only once. His vision led to the creation of over 400 child advocacy centers nationwide, with 59 in Texas. The Collin County Advocacy Center was created when local service providers and volunteers recognized an urgent need for change. CCCAC has served over 20,000 children and their non-offending family members since its inception in 1993. The building houses law enforcement officers representing 13 counties, forensic interviewers, nurses, district attorneys, therapists, administrative staff, volunteers and all of Collin County's Child Protective Services. CCCAC receives 100 percent of the child abuse and neglect calls from law enforcement and/or medical personnel for the county.

The current facility was built in 1999, contains 32,000 square feet and accommodates over 120 professionals. The original intent was for the building to comfortably fit everyone for ten years; they outgrew it in three. The reason for the growth is, of course, the constant influx of people into Collin County. There are plans to expand the building to provide some

relief to the staff and volunteers currently working around and over each other. There is also a need for a satellite office in northern Collin County, but land on which to build does not come cheap. Donations anyone?

HELPING SURVIVORS THROUGH THE NIGHTMARE

What makes the Advocacy Center such a remarkable place is the multidisciplinary approach it takes when handling reports



Entrance Mural

photo by Beth Robinson

Protecting the Smallest Among Us

By Debbie Vallejo

to Congress and during his time in the legal system grew distressed over the systemic problems involved in handling abuse allegations. Children suffering abuse told their story over and over as they were moved from police stations to social services to hospitals and back again. Jane Donovan is the Community Educator for CCCAC. "The system in place to help a child suffering from abuse was actually re-victimizing them each time they told their story," says Ms. Donovan. The whole idea



Supplies available in the Rainbow Room

photo by Beth Robinson

and investigations. Each individual involved in the process understands how their role relates to the investigation and the law. Susan Etheridge is the executive director for CCCAC. “This is a team effort,” says Ms. Etheridge, “schools, police officers, district attorneys, CPS and others all come together to help the client and non-offending family members.”

There is a strong sense of purpose in everything about CCCAC. Walking into the Advocacy Center one is immediately struck by the color and expressiveness of the art on exhibit. Children’s artwork hangs on the walls and standing in the foyer are colorful, child size community buildings paid for by donations. First time victims of abuse arrive at the center and are greeted by a warm environment, rather than the cold atmosphere characteristic of a police station or hospital. Staffers have carefully choreographed each step of the process to help alleviate the pain caused to the child and employ the best investigative strategies for catching perpetrators.

The first step in the process is the Activity Room, where a client can play and enjoy age-appropriate games designed to help ease their fear. After a few minutes of free play, the forensic interviewer

arrives to meet the child. The interviewer and child get to know each other by participating in activities created to make the child feel more comfortable. After spending some time in the Activity Room, the two then move to one of the private, video-monitored Interview Rooms. Law enforcement, CPS, district attorneys and others involved in the investigation watch the interview from an adjacent Observation Room. Before concluding the session, the forensic interviewer checks with the observing professionals to make sure all pertinent questions were asked.

When sexual abuse is involved the child may go to the Medical Suite after the interview. On-call nurses trained in providing sexual assault examinations staff the Medical Suite. A volunteer for the center welcomes the child before the beginning of the examination and gives him or her a quilt to hold for comfort during the exam. The suite is another testimony to the intent of the center. Where hospital rooms are often cold and uninviting, this room is comforting and colorful. Pictures cover the walls of the room while stuffed animals sit on shelves and blankets decorate the examining table. A person taking a tour can almost forget the intent

of the room while looking at the cheerful décor, but the size of the examination table is a stark reminder of why such facilities exist. Where a hospital table is long and adult size, this table is made to fit smaller bodies. It’s hard to keep the ugly picture of abuse at bay when it’s staring you right in the face.

ONGOING TREATMENT

In addition to the initial interview process, the center also provides continuing therapy for clients. They offer four therapeutic avenues of expression; music, art, play and family. Each therapy session is conducted by a trained professional and geared toward allowing each client to express him or herself in a way to promote healing. “The whole point of therapy is expressive. The kids can’t always find words to describe their experience,” says Ms. Donovan. Again the décor in each therapy room reflects the clients at CCCAC. Each room is vibrant and full of life and the halls display complete works from the art therapy sessions. The Advocacy Center sees over 230 children a week and is able to offer services free of charge because of community contributions and grants.

CCCAC also provides visitation rooms



The faces of abuse
photo by Beth Robinson

for clients and their non-offending family members permitted by the courts to have supervised visits. Each room holds toys and activities and is painted with a particularly fun theme. The jungle theme has a large mural painted on the walls and displays lots of smiling animals swinging through trees. In one high corner where the ceiling meets the wall hangs a camera to video each visit.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

In her role for the Advocacy Center, Jane Donovan educates the community on how abuse impacts everyone. Child abuse is “relentlessly democratic,” says Ms. Donovan. “It knows no ethnicity, religion or economic barrier. It happens in our schools, our churches and our homes. It happens everywhere.” She uses her “bully pulpit” as she calls it, to help parents and community members understand that it is never too early to start teaching children about personal boundaries and inappropriate touching. She explains the hula-hoop lesson they teach children and parents. When a child is standing in the middle of a hula-hoop, the boundaries of the hoop represent their personal space. “I tell kids that anyone entering their hula-hoop or personal space needs their permission,” says Ms. Donovan. “Only four percent of children abused are abused by strangers, so it is really important to talk to kids about appropriate boundaries.” On a tour of the Center it is not uncommon

to see hula-hoops stashed in various places around the building.

Abuse knows no ethnicity, religion or economic barrier. It happens in our schools, our churches and our homes.

Ms. Donovan will talk to anyone willing to listen about how adults can help guard children from abuse. She has coloring books she created that help adults work through the difficult topic of abuse with their young children. The main characters in the coloring books have names like Butter, Peanut and Jelly. Each character is based on a puppet family created by Ms. Donovan and CCCAC called The Kids Count Players. The Players are used for puppet shows during community education programs or therapy sessions with clients. As well as talking with children, Ms. Donovan will complete on-site training for schools, churches, Moms groups or any other group wanting to better understand how to protect children against the ugliness of abuse.

A non-profit agency does not hold together long without a successful volunteer program. David Glickman is the

Volunteer Coordinator for the center. “Currently 100 volunteers help in any number of jobs around the Center,” explains Mr. Glickman. “At any given time there are a number of volunteers I can call for all variety of needs.” Volunteers help in office tasks, event planning, errands and babysitting children at the Center when needed. Applications are online or those interested in volunteering may call the Center directly.

FUNDING

Less than 10 percent of Collin County Children’s Advocacy Center funding comes from state or federal aid. The remainder is raised through donations, United Way funding and grants. With an annual budget of \$2 million, Center staff are continually working on special events and finding new donors in order to have the money to keep the Center up and running. There are a variety of ways to give monetarily to the Center. Cash donations are always welcome, but there are also fundraisers held throughout the year. Silver bracelets bearing the slogan “Honor Thy Children” are available for purchase online and proceeds go directly to the Center. More information is available on the CCCAC website at www.cacplano.org.

The Rainbow Room is a resource center providing emergency items for clients served through CCCAC. Staffers, volunteers and interns work to keep the Rainbow Room stocked with school supplies, toiletries, clothes, shoes, car seats and any other items necessary for assisting children in urgent need. For information on how to make donations to the resource center, check out the website above or call the Advocacy Center directly at 972.633.6600.

SUSPECTING CHILD ABUSE

“We here at the Children’s Advocacy Center recognize how difficult it is to report suspected abuse, but we all have a duty to report it,” shares Ms. Donovan. “If you think a child is being abused call 1.800.252.5400 or call 911.”

Debbie Vallejo is a freelance writer living in Frisco.