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Children's Advocacy Center to open in Coeur d'Alene

Today we are pleased to announce that the northern Idaho Children's Advocacy Center will open Wednesday, September 12, 2012. The northern Idaho Children's Advocacy Center (CAC) is a facility where children who are being evaluated for abuse can be interviewed and examined in a safe and child-friendly environment.

All children who are suspected victims of abuse deserve a sensitive, coordinated approach during investigations to reduce additional trauma. Unfortunately, some victims experience a more fragmented investigative system, as children are often interviewed and examined at multiple times in multiple locations. This northern Idaho CAC will consolidate services for these children into one location where professionals come to the child. In addition, professionals trained in forensic interviewing (law enforcement or certified mental health professionals) will conduct and document interviews in a manner consistent with evidence collection protocols, and will do so in a way that is child-friendly and provides a sense of safety and security for the child and non-offending family members.

Program Partners

A committee consisting of child protection workers, law enforcement officers, mental health providers, medical providers, victims' advocates, and prosecutors has been meeting monthly since February of 2011 on this topic.

The committee's vision was for a team of specially trained professionals to conduct child interviews, medical examinations and assessments in a child-friendly environment. This has been a long-standing need in our community.

Leadership for the establishment of the CAC consists of a broad array of professionals committed to enhancing services to children being evaluated for abuse. Representatives included professionals from the following agencies: Kootenai County Prosecutor's Office, Kootenai County Sheriff's Department, Coeur d'Alene Police Department, North Idaho Violence Prevention Center, the Post Falls Police Department, Rathdrum Police Department, Spirit Lake Police Department, Kootenai Health, local

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pediatricians, the Coeur d'Alene Tribe, pediatric and sexual assault trained nurses, social work professionals, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), Department of Health and Welfare, as well as community-based counselors.

In 2011 Kootenai Health was approached to help. The Kootenai Health Foundation agreed to provide a challenge grant, as well as to help seek and administer additional funding. Funding for the Center came from the Inland Northwest Community Foundation (\$30,000), the Coeur d'Alene Tribe (\$5,000), the Kootenai Health Foundation (\$60,000), the Governor's Task Force on Children at Risk (\$10,000), as well as various individuals and community groups. Kootenai Health is providing the location for the Center. In addition the hospital will help to operate the center under the management of Kootenai Behavioral Health.

Law enforcement and appropriate child welfare personnel will conduct interviews and local health professionals will provide medical evaluation services. The North Idaho Violence Prevention Center will provide advocacy services and victim's assistance will be coordinated through the Prosecutor's office.

Funding was used to purchase equipment, furnishings and remodel a building for the facility. There are two interview rooms each equipped with child friendly furnishings and recording equipment. One room is specifically designed for younger children and the other is for older children. The recording equipment is vital because it will provide a permanent evidentiary record of exactly what occurred with the child during the interview process. By allowing the interviewer to focus solely on the child, and not worry about restating testimony later, there will be increased reliability in the investigative process.

There is also a medical exam room with equipment designed for children. Previously, children in need of forensic medical exams were taken to the emergency room or doctors' office. This will allow additional privacy and an evidence collection process consistent with forensic collection requirements in a child-friendly environment.

The primary service area is Kootenai County, but the center will also be utilized by Boundary, Bonner, Shoshone and Benewah counties, as well as the Coeur d'Alene Tribe.

The need addressed by the project

Research conducted by the National Children's Advocacy Center shows that the average age of those served by a CAC is 8 and that most children are 6 or younger.

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Statistics show that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys have been abused; there is a great community need for a helpful and healing environment for children affected by abuse.

According to data provided by the Coeur d'Alene Police Department, Kootenai County Sheriff's Department, Post Falls Police Department, the Department of Health and Welfare and the Kootenai County Prosecutor's Office, the incidence of abuse to children continues to rise. The Kootenai County Sheriff's Department alone investigated 31 cases of child rape in the year 2006, this number rose by 42 percent in 2010 to 44 cases.

In a typical child abuse case, kids are interviewed up to 15 times. The interviews begin when someone is told about the abuse and continue as more people are notified. Additional people include law enforcement, a nurse, a social worker, a doctor, a detective, a child protection investigator, a lawyer, and a counselor. In communities with CAC's, the number of interviews drops to three.

Impact

It is anticipated that at least 100-120 cases of alleged abuse will be evaluated at the CAC in the first year alone.

In both the short and long term, the northern Idaho Children's Advocacy Center will reduce trauma to children. In the short-term, trauma will be reduced because children will have to tell their stories less often. In the long-term, the legal system will be able to intervene on behalf of children in a more supportive environment and prosecutors will have better tools to help protect children in our community. This will be accomplished in a way that is child friendly and provides a sense of safety and security for the child and non-offending family members.

Vision

For now the Center will be available for use by law enforcement and health and welfare professionals, with advocacy services provided by the North Idaho Violence Prevention Center. Forensic interviews will be conducted by trained professionals with those agencies. The Team's goal for the future is to eventually hire a full time professionally trained forensic interviewer who is also a counselor. The achievement of that vision will depend on securing the funding necessary to assure that a professional trained and credentialed individual can be hired and supported over the long term.

Referrals

To report suspected child abuse, please contact your local law enforcement agency. To make a donation you may contact the Kootenai Health Foundation at 666-2345.

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