



'We Need to Advocate For Our Children'

Agency offers hope to abused kids

By Diane Gale Andreassi

IMAGINE a child who has seen a parent murdered or who has suffered another trauma and they have to keep reliving the incident during various interviews investigating the case.

When abuse and neglect are suspected, Kids-TALK Children's Advocacy Center conducts the interviews as part of a multi-disciplinary response in Wayne County.

"If there are allegations that a child is a victim of abuse or neglect, there's a team effort of surrounding the children in a neutral space," said Melanie Richards, the Kids-TALK CAC director. "Not every allegation of abuse and neglect is true. We're looking at how can we help the child and family heal."

The agency also interviews children if they potentially witnessed abuse and other crimes during criminal investigations.

Sometimes families reach out to Kids-TALK CAC at the agency's two facilities in Southgate and Detroit. Other times the connection is made by law enforcement officials.

Kids-TALK CAC works with police, the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office, the Michigan Attorney General's Office, Children's Protective Services and on occasion, the FBI and Homeland Security. The program's team is trained to deal with children who have experienced trauma in a child-friendly atmosphere, rather than a sterile law enforcement interrogation room.

"We don't interrogate," said Karen DeKett, The Kids-TALK CAC Program manager. "We meet with the child to make sure they feel safe and comfortable. It's child centered, child informed and designed to be child friendly."

Advocacy services are tailored to the child's and family's needs.

"We try to make sure all the entities who need to be involved are working together for all the children who come through our doors," Richards said.

Solving problems together

"Gone are the days where child abuse is someone else's issue," she added. "Children are waiting too long for services. We need support. Our goal is to have someone come in for service within three days after the incident and we're nowhere close to that."

She pointed to the staggering number of young people affected by abuse. In fact, statistics show one in 10 children will be sexually abused before they're 18.

"We need to work together to advocate," Richards said. "We cobble together grants, but we need the community to advocate for our children."

Kids-TALK CAC serves more than 2,000 children and their families annually. They also provide information about legal aid and personal protection services.

The program is part of The Guidance Center, which is one of the largest mental health and substance use service providers in Wayne County, primarily in the 18 Downriver cities and townships. The Guidance Center is supported by the Detroit Wayne Integrated Health Network, serving more than 75,000 citizens in Detroit and Wayne County.

"Trauma in childhood is common," DeKett said. "It's a community issue that impacts us all. We all need to be champions of children and their families. They are our future teachers, leaders and doctors. Kids-TALK CAC is where hope and healing begins. Help is available."

Email Kids-TALK CAC at kidstalkcac@guidance-center.org. For therapy services contact (734) 785-7705, extension 7672 or kidstalkcatherapy@guidance-center.org.

For more information on DWIHN's services and programs, visit www.dwihn.org.

If you or someone you know needs help, please call the Access Call Center 24-hour Helpline at 800-241-4949.

