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HELPING CHILDREN THROUGH THE SYSTEM: THE CHILD ADVOCACY CENTER REVOLUTION

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Fourteen years ago, children who reported sexual abuse faced a situation sometimes as terrifying as the trauma they had just suffered: a one-size-fits-all justice system. They were treated no differently than someone reporting a property crime, often being passed from one agency to another, forced to retell and re-live their trauma time and time again.

Each agency, from the police to child protective services to medical services, needed to hear the details, and a few seemed to share information. As the abused children and their families wandered through the maze of bureaucracy, many began to feel re-victimized and some eventually gave up, leaving the child unprotected and the perpetrator free to continue abusing.

Fortunately, a revolution in child abuse response began to stir in 1985, led by District Attorney Robert E. "Bud" Cramer of Madison County, Alabama. He vowed to change the system after meeting a young girl who had been traumatized by the very system that was supposed to protect her. He called together professionals and volunteers who cared deeply about these children, and they began to redesign their community's response.

This kind of cooperation became the basis for the first Children's Advocacy Center, and the professionals who helped it succeed formed the Multidisciplinary Team, which is the heart of the Center. The Team includes representatives from social services, law enforcement, medical services, the prosecutor's office, and mental health services.

The Team determined that the primary focus of each case would be the children and their families, rather than the convenience of the social service or legal service. A cozy, home-like center established where all abused children are directly referred for interviews. This means they no longer have to re-live the scary or embarrassing details in front of dozens of strangers, but can talk about it once with a member of the Multidisciplinary team. Using special interviewing techniques, the professionals gather accurate information and share it with all the involved team members. This allows the investigative process to move forward while still helping the child begin the healing process. To ensure that cases proceed in a timely manner and that the child is receiving the necessary services, the Multidisciplinary Team meets weekly to review active cases and make recommendations on their progress.

Today the original CAC in Huntsville, Alabama, has become a model for more than 400 programs nationwide, giving thousands of children a voice they did not previously have. Communities that have adopted the CAC/Multidisciplinary Team concept experience numerous benefits, including more immediate follow-up to child abuse reports, more efficient support for victims and non-offending parents.

For more information about the CAC concept, contact the Regional Children's Advocacy Center

serving your area. These are: Southern Regional Children's Advocacy Center, 1-800-747-8122; Midwest Regional Children's Advocacy Center, 1-312-363-6700, ext. 421; Northeast Regional Children's Advocacy Center, 1-800-662-4124; and the Western Regional Children's Advocacy Center, 1-800-582-2230. The National Alliance, 1-800-239-9950, can also provide information on CAC's.