

Children's Advocacy Center of Indiana County

Child maltreatment, whether it is physical, mental, emotional or sexual abuse or neglect, is a community problem requiring a community solution. Most people are not aware that child abuse occurs at alarming rates and that children must share their experiences over and over with numerous professionals who are involved in the case, such as law enforcement, court officials, social service workers, medical personnel, victim advocates and mental health professionals. This process of retelling can be frightening, painful and re-traumatizing for children. Children's Advocacy Centers are designed to change that experience by providing for a coordinated effort where the child is interviewed just once by a specially trained forensic interviewer at the Center in a "child friendly room" with a one-way mirror. This arrangement allows the other involved officials to observe and gain the facts that they need during this forensic interview rather than the child going through a series of separate interviews.

The need for such a Center in Indiana County became apparent when in 2003, Dr. Bonach, as lead Principal Investigator, with the support of the local court system, evaluated processes of handling alleged child abuse cases in Indiana County. In the evaluation process, it was recognized that accessibility and duplication of statements were problem areas. Furthermore, because Indiana County has a rural geography, access to the network of services was costly, traumatic and geographically distant. Because of the time and cost involved, only the most severe child abuse cases in Indiana County were being referred to the nearest Children's Advocacy Center in a neighboring county, over 120 miles away, for the forensic interview and coordination of services.

As a result of the above evaluation, Dr. Bonach spearheaded initiatives to network agencies in Indiana County that needed to be involved with developing a Children's Advocacy Center locally. A key informational meeting was held July 6, 2004, with all the entities involved in the processing of child abuse cases. From that collaborative meeting a task force was formed and an interagency operational agreement was signed by all entities required to develop a Children's Advocacy Center. Those entities include: the law enforcement, child protective services, victim advocacy, medical and mental health, prosecution and children's advocacy center. Dr. Bonach as lead Principal Investigator, with Anne Sedlemeyer from the Indiana Regional Medical, prepared two federal grant proposals for program development and training. Both grants were awarded beginning January 2005 from the National Children's Alliance, the accrediting and governing body for Children's Advocacy Centers. Dr. Bonach was honored with the IUP Research Institute New Investigator Award in the spring of 2005 for her work with the Children's Advocacy Center of Indiana County.

The Children's Advocacy Center is overseen by the I.U.P. Research Institute, the Principal Investigator, and a member of each multidisciplinary agency that sits on the Advisory Committee. The Advisory Committee members include Dr. Kathy Bonach,

Chair (I.U.P.), Brad Shields (State Police), Bob Bell (District Attorney), Don Gibbon (Indiana Regional Medical Center), Ann Sedlemeyer (Indiana Healthcare Physician Services), Paula McClure (Children Youth Service), Kim Cunkelman (Alice Paul House) and Dr. Ralph May (Community Guidance Center). The need for a collaborative effort is apparent. Children who are victims of physical and sexual abuse require services from multiple systems. To reduce the trauma to the child and facilitate the healing process, the Children's Advocacy Center of Indiana County provides child sensitive forensic interviews, coordination of medical evaluations, therapeutic intervention, victim advocacy and support, multidisciplinary case reviews and ongoing case tracking.

The Center has made tremendous progress during the initial 2005 grant period. A Coordinator for the center was hired; a child friendly location was secured with the generous support and resourcefulness of property owner and center supporter, TJ Frick; and national standards were met that granted the Center Associate Membership status with the National Children's Alliance. Through gracious donations and grant funding, the center was furnished and obtained all equipment and supplies necessary to operate efficiently and perform forensic interviews with technological sophistication. Indiana University students demonstrated support of the Children's Advocacy Center's mission. The Rho Tau Chi fraternity donated funds raised during a campus event. The National Arts Education Association painted animal murals on the walls of the Center that added a special touch to the child friendly atmosphere.

In 2006 Dr. Bonach as Principal Investigator and Ms. Kathleen Moore, the Center Coordinator, prepared three federal grants; one grant for continued program development, one for ongoing training, and a prevention grant in collaboration with the Open Door to address substance abuse and child maltreatment. All three federal grants were awarded from the National Children's Alliance for 2006. This second year of federal funding completes the final phase of NCA funding for program development. Dr. Bonach and Ms. Moore have also secured additional funding through the Highmark foundation for 2006. In collaboration with the Alice Paul House a FISA grant was secured to fund a family advocate position for the 2006 calendar year at the Center to address domestic violence and child maltreatment. The sustainability of the Center is contingent upon successful grant writing, fund raising and community support through donations and corporate sponsors.

The Children's Advocacy Center had a formal Ribbon Cutting Ceremony on January 19, 2006 to officially open the Center. There were many IUP and local dignitaries in attendance demonstrating their support for the Center including, Dr. Tony Atwater, Dr. Yaw Asamoah, Dr. Ramesh Soni, Dr. Alex Heckert, Mark Berezansky, Senator Don White, Representative Dave Reed, Mayor George Hood, Judge Carol Hanna, Commissioners Dave Frick, Rod Ruddock and Bernie Smith, and District Justice Guy Haberl. At the ceremony, Steve Wolf, CEO of Indiana Regional Medical Center, announced that the hospital would provide a dedicated room for the forensic medical exams to be performed by Dr. Don Gibbon who is specially trained to perform pediatric forensic medical exams. The Indiana County Commissioners made a proclamation of

their support for the Children's Advocacy Center and the Indiana Borough Mayor, George Hood proclaimed January 19, 2006 Children's Advocacy Day in Indiana County.

The Children's Advocacy Center of Indiana County is dedicated to building upon the success of each entity involved to achieve a common goal to improve the investigation, treatment and prevention of child abuse and neglect. Our hope is to provide *every* child impacted by child abuse with a coordinated, collaborative intervention and access to the most effective, efficient services and resources possible. The continued development and success of the Children's Advocacy Center relies, in part, on the support of the entire community to join together with the Center to make a difference in the lives of victimized children.

Recently at the Ribbon Cutting Ceremony Dr. Bonach stated "It is a wonderful feeling to know that you have given a child hope that life can be different; that healing is possible and justice can prevail; to know that you have done something that has made a difference—that you have helped to heal not only physical wounds, but mended a broken heart and rejuvenated a tattered spirit of a child. We need the support of the entire community to make this kind of difference. It does take a village to raise a child and it takes a community to protect a child."