

History of Southeast Alabama Child Advocacy Center

Multi-disciplinary agency leaders responded to the silent cries of the abused children in the Wiregrass area by establishing the Southeast Alabama Child Advocacy Center in 1991. After carefully assessing the needs of the community, steps were taken to ensure children who were victims of sexual and severe physical abuse would have a safe place where they could receive help. The Center is a private 501 (c) 3 non-profit agency governed by a 15 to 25 member Board of Directors and became fully operational in July 1994.

Douglas A. Valeska, District Attorney for the 20th Judicial Circuit, which is comprised of Henry and Houston Counties, was on the founding Board of Directors and instrumental in the development of the CAC. Over the years he has worked to strengthen the multidisciplinary team concept by coordinating, participating in, and funding educational opportunities for multidisciplinary team members. Today he continues to support multidisciplinary team services, serves as the Chairman of the CAC Advisory Board, and serves on the CAC Board of Directors.

Since September 1994, the CAC staff has served over 8,200 child victims and their non-offending family members. Some of the services we provide are: (1) a facility for professionals to coordinate multidisciplinary team interviews and investigations of child sexual abuse cases; (2) crisis intervention and counseling services; (3) forensic interviews and forensic evaluations; (4) criminal court support; (5) child abuse programs and child abuse prevention materials and (6) parenting classes and support groups. We serve children from ages 2 through 17 and provide support services to their non-offending family members.

Each year the need for the services we provide is evident by the number of referrals we continue to receive from throughout the Wiregrass area. Since October 1997, our clinical staff has provided over 794,280 crisis intervention, counseling, and support services for child abuse victims and their non-offending family members. During the same time period, 1,904 education

programs were provided to area law enforcement personnel, social workers, civic groups, schools, churches, and others, serving over 43,472 people.

The first goal of the Child Advocacy Center is to reduce trauma for child victims of sexual and severe physical abuse. One way we do this is by serving as their advocate and by providing a safe, child-friendly facility for multi-disciplinary team members to conduct child abuse interviews. Another goal is to heighten public awareness about the problems associated with child abuse and neglect. We strive to meet this goal by providing education and training to professionals and non-professionals. The Center serves as a community resource center where prevention materials are made available for distribution and used throughout our area.

In July 1994, the Center began serving children in a rented house on West Main Street in Dothan. In December 1994, Judge William McFatter deeded an acre of land to the Center. In 1995, David Ritchie, a local architect, contributed the architectural design for a new facility to be built at 110 Harmony Lane, near Landmark Park in Dothan. The Center broke ground for the new facility on January 17, 1996, and construction began in February 1996. Due to the tremendous financial and volunteer support of the community, we were able to move into the new facility in October 1996, with no debt on the building.

In 1999, the CAC Long Range Planning Committee again began the process of evaluating and assessing our need for additional space, expanding programs, and adding personnel. It was determined that in order to provide quality services to more clients, the CAC would need to expand the present facility. Therefore, preliminary plans were developed and committees formed to begin the expansion process.

In 2000, the CAC received a \$26,500 donation from the Dothan/Wiregrass Home Builders Association and a \$50,000 capital improvement grant from the United Parcel Service Foundation. This money became seed money and set the stage for a Capital Building Campaign. In 2001, the Board entered into this campaign with the goal of raising \$500,000. By December

2002, local businessman, David Herndon, committed to provide \$248,000 to build the Education Wing, and over \$360,000 was pledged or given to support the project!

Land was purchased, and J. Michael Lee, a local architect, donated the architectural design to construct two wings to house our Clinical and Education Components. Ground was broken on March 4, 2002. We moved into the new additions during the last week of December 2002. Once again, due to the generous support of the community, we were able to move into the new facility debt free.

The Center's staff grew from one Executive Director in July 1994 to 8 full-time employees and one part-time employee in December 2001. However, by 2002, budget cuts at the state and federal level forced us to cut back to seven full-time employees. In 2004, our financial situation improved, and we once again were able to employ eight full-time staff members. In 2005, the CAC was able to expand our programs to include hiring a Community Development Coordinator to focus on fundraising and public awareness. We also were able to employ another therapist which increased the CAC staff to 10 positions. In 2006, the Center was able to employ an additional Family Advocate to assist in the development of protocols for multidisciplinary agency services for victims in Dale and Geneva Counties. At the present time, we have eleven full-time positions which include an Executive Director, a Program Director, a Forensic Investigation Coordinator, an Office Manager, a Community Development Coordinator, 3 Therapist/Forensic Interviewers, one Therapist, 2 Family Advocates and a Victim Service Worker.

Volunteers are vital to the success of our fund-raising activities and in our efforts to fight child abuse. Volunteers come from local schools, civic groups, colleges, churches, businesses, social service agencies, the Department of Human Resources in Henry, Houston, Dale and Geneva Counties, law enforcement, and medical and mental health professionals. Since 1998, volunteers have contributed over 9,775 hours of volunteer services.

To help define the CAC and our program, in 2000 the CAC Board of Director's Public Relations Committee, obtained a mascot and had a song written for and donated to the Center. "Sparkle," the Safety Bunny (a big, blue bunny), is now available for special events. "Sparkle" reminds everyone that children are special and need to receive praise, attention, respect, kindness and love, everyday. Mrs. Jo Johnston, a local composer, wrote the lyrics and produced the song "For the Children." The song speaks directly about the hurt and the need to "make it right for the children." Over the years, "Sparkle" and "For the Children" have helped make the CAC a more recognizable agency within our community, thereby, enhancing our programs.

For the past fifteen years, the Center has participated in National Child Abuse Prevention Month by coordinating a major community-wide awareness campaign in Henry and Houston Counties during April. Beginning in 2006, Dale and Geneva Counties, and in 2008 Covington County, joined with the Board of Directors, staff, and community volunteers to distribute blue lapel ribbons, information, and materials emphasizing child abuse prevention. Each year, the Center is featured on local TV stations and talk shows, and Public Service Announcements run on local radio and TV stations. In addition, many articles and pictures are published in community newspapers. The community continues to support our efforts as evidenced by the calls we receive asking for information on child abuse and requesting volunteer applications.

For years, Wiregrass Commons Mall has joined our efforts by sponsoring an annual "Kid's Day at the Mall." Games and activities are available which encourage positive family interactions. Parenting information, brochures listing community resources, blue lapel ribbons, and door ribbons are provided throughout the Wiregrass area. Over the years, the Blue Ribbon Public Awareness Campaigns have raised over \$625,700 for the support of the Center. Most recently, the 2009 "Blue Ribbon Friday for Kid's" t-shirt sponsors of \$1,000 or more were: District Attorney Douglas A. Valeska, Houston/Henry Counties; District Attorney Kirke Adams, Dale/Geneva Counties; the Dothan Exchange Club; Wiregrass Construction Company; Larry

Blumberg and Associates; Consolidated Electrical Contractors and Engineers Inc.; Southeastern Pediatric Associates; Oncology Supply; Dale County Commission; and Wal-Mart Foundation.

We also coordinate an annual "Tee Off for Kids" golf tournament with volunteers from local businesses. The golf tournament provides an opportunity for golfers to learn more about our programs and how they can help children, while enjoying a day of golf. In 2006 Mike Schmitz Automotive Group sponsored the area's premier Charity Helicopter Golf Ball Drop in conjunction with the golf tournament. In 2007, Herndon Shell Food Marts/Checkers sponsored the Golf Ball Drop. In 2008, Herndon Shell Food Marts/Checkers became the presenting sponsor of the "Tee Off for Kids" golf tournament and CenturyTel was the Golf Ball Drop sponsor. In 2009, both Herndon Shell Food Marts/Checkers and CenturyTel remained as the sponsors of the 15th annual "Tee Off For Kid's" golf tournament. Joining them as gold sponsors were Consolidated Electrical Contractors and Engineers, Inc.; District Attorney Douglas A. Valeska, Houston/Henry Counties; and District Attorney Kirke Adams, Dale/Geneva Counties. Silver sponsors were: SunSouth Bank; Barlovento, LLC; ServPro of Dothan; Southeastern Pediatric Associates; and Wiregrass Construction Company, Inc. Golf cart sponsors were: Dothan Pediatric Clinic; Oncology Supply; and Wells Fargo Advisors – Jim Sapp. Score card sponsors were: Burnham Shoes and Mike Schmitz Automotive Group. Team prize sponsors were: Buffalo Rock; Lewis-Smith Supply; and Mayer Electric. The putting contest was sponsored by Burger King, and the Hole-in-One sponsor was Bojangles'. The 15th annual "Tee Off For Kids" golf tournament was a great success because of the dedication of our volunteers and financial supporters! The golf tournaments have contributed over \$627,400 toward the support of the Center.

The CAC receives a special appropriation from the Alabama Legislature each year to provide services for children in our area. Over the past few years, this appropriation has decreased by more than half; therefore, we must rely heavily on donations and fund raising

events to support and maintain the various services we provide. In addition to our fund raising events, during the past fiscal year, we received financial support from the cities of Abbeville, Headland, Dothan, Daleville, Hartford and Ozark; the Houston, Henry, and Dale County Commissions; the E.L. Gibson Foundation; First United Methodist Church; Old Zion Baptist Church; Mt. Gilead Baptist Church; the Abbeville Matron's Club; the Kiwanis Club of Houston County; WTVY-FM; the Eclectas Club; and many others.

This past year, the CAC has been awarded grants from the Alabama Civil Justice Foundation, the CitiFinancial Foundation, the Wiregrass Foundation, the National Children's Alliance, the Children's Trust Fund of Alabama and the Victims of Crime Act Grant and Family Violence Prevention Act Grant which are administered through the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs.

The Center provides education and training opportunities for multidisciplinary team members from Houston, Henry, Barbour, Covington, Dale, Geneva, and other counties. These workshops have been made possible through training grants from various resources. Over the years, the CAC has developed a more comprehensive child abuse/neglect program, as we have reached out to underserved portions of the Wiregrass area.

Since 1994, the CAC has provided specialized services for abused children and their non-offending family members. There is no charge to the families for the services they receive. It is the desire of the Board of Directors and Staff to ensure child abuse victims begin the healing process through the development and implementation of programs designed with the child's best interest at heart!

Sherryl Walker, Executive Director

October 1, 2009