

In 1985, Fred Foreman, Lake County State's Attorney, commissioned a task force to review child abuse protocols in Lake County. The task force included over 100 stakeholders within the various disciplines. Included were school personnel, medical personnel, mental health, law enforcement, military, DCFS, County Board members, attorneys, judges and local politicians. During the first year, the task force completed a detailed and thorough review of Lake County's response to child abuse allegations. The findings showed a disjointed system. Fifteen cases were charged the previous year and 7 of these made their way through the court system. Each agency worked independently, most not trained in the intricacies of child abuse, and grappling for ways to handle these reports. Responses were piecemeal and coordinated services were non-existent. Case information was not shared, and children were often interviewed an average of 6 times, by different agencies and oftentimes in the same day. Several police departments assigned dispatchers to interview children rather than law enforcement officers. Children were re-traumatized by a system that was designed to protect them. A new approach was required to investigate these heinous crimes. The task force was then charged with two additional tasks:

- Provide training and education for all stakeholders in Lake County
- Develop a plan to create a child focused response to child abuse allegations in Lake County

To address training and education, the task force implemented a yearlong training program, targeting each of the various disciplines involved in child maltreatment allegations. The trainings, the first of its kind in Lake County, were designed specifically for law enforcement, social services, therapists, medical personnel, attorneys and judges. The training concluded with an educational training for the community at large. Throughout the year, all professional groups received training.

In an effort to provide a child focused response to child abuse allegations, a small group of task force members researched programs throughout the country. After visiting Huntsville, Alabama's Children's Advocacy Center, plans began to develop the Lake County Children's Advocacy Center (CAC). The CAC opened in a small house in downtown Waukegan, located just a few blocks from the courthouse. The Waukegan Police Department, Lake County Sheriff's Department, Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and the State's Attorney's Office assigned staff to work at the CAC. Volunteers from the local police departments, fire departments and the State's Attorney's Office, painted and refurbished the house on West Street. The Waukegan Police Department donated the furnishings of a two-bedroom apartment seized in a drug arrest.

The CAC was designed to provide a safe, non-threatening environment for child victims of abuse, focused on the well-being and safety of the child. Children were no longer interviewed in the chaotic environment of the lobby or detective bureau of the police station. Case information was shared, and trained individuals interviewed children, and shared the information with other agencies. Children were interviewed once, whenever possible. A specially trained victim advocate provided services to all children and their non-offending family members. A team, consisting of a law enforcement officer and a DCFS investigator worked together to ensure a coordinated interview and follow-up services. Alleged offender interviews were conducted by the CAC trained law enforcement and DCFS workers. Follow-up services and court preparation were conducted at the new CAC. Medical exams were coordinated by CAC staff.

A missing component was the local availability of child forensic medical exams. Trained medical staff were available in Chicago and Milwaukee, which required families to travel to either location for a medical exam. Shortly after the CAC opened, a group of nurses from Victory Hospital (currently Vista Hospital) worked with CAC staff to develop a medical clinic for Lake County's children. After a year of planning and fundraising, the Medical Examination Clinic for Child Abuse (MECCA) opened. Staffed by trained medical personnel and housed in a private wing of the hospital, the medical gap was filled. Funding issues eventually caused the MECCA program to close. Fortunately, Advocate Condell Hospital opened a pediatric emergency department and child forensic exams were conducted within the pediatric emergency department. Advocate eventually closed its pediatric emergency department. The current CAC staff were determined to continue to provide and improve this service and with hard work and dedication, the medical clinic is now housed at the CAC.

Under State's Attorney Michael Waller's leadership, the CAC moved to its new location in Gurnee. Funding was secured to purchase and renovate the building. Services were expanded to include a full-time Spanish speaking victim coordinator and an additional investigator.

The Center continues to grow and evolve, but there are several factors that have not changed and are integral to the CAC's success. Throughout the Center's history, the commitment of the CAC staff, it's professional partners and community partners have remained constant. Because of their tireless effort and support; the CAC opened its doors, provided a much-needed service for child victims and continues to grow.

The dedication of the staff, past and present, are instrumental in the continued success of the CAC. It was an honor to work with such an amazing group of professionals. It is an honor to witness the many ways the CAC is growing and continues to meet the needs of the children.



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