



**Testimony of Abbie Newman, RN, JD, CEO Mission Kids Child Advocacy Center
to Senate Committee on Aging and Youth, 8/8/23**

Good afternoon Sen. Ward, Sen. Collett, and members of the Committee. Thank you so much for giving us this opportunity to appear before you today. My name is Abbie Newman, and I am from Mission Kids Child Advocacy Center. Mission Kids is a nationally accredited CAC, located in Montgomery County, which is the 3rd most populous county in Pennsylvania with 850,000 people. I became the founding Executive Director of Mission Kids in 2008, and my current position is CEO of External and Global Affairs. *Attached these notes is a short summary of the need for Mission Kids and the services that we provide.*

As you have heard, Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) spares no race, religion, gender, or ethnicity. The statistics are staggering- 1/10 children will be sexually abused before the age of 18. Untreated CSA can have life-long effects, including adverse physical and mental health issues, drug and alcohol abuse, early pregnancies, and fewer years of schooling. Stuningly, 50% of incarcerated people have a history of CSA. This is just one example of how untreated CSA, which is more likely in communities without a child advocacy center, will follow children and change their lives, ***and all of ours***, into adulthood. ***The issue of child sexual abuse is truly non-partisan.***

In 2024 Mission Kids will mark 15 years of providing collaborative services with our District Attorney's Office, Montgomery County Office of Children and Youth, and all 50 police departments, for victims of child sexual abuse, serious physical abuse, and witnesses to violence such as domestic violence and homicide. Over the years we have been able to add victims' advocates, referrals for child abuse physicians, and specialized mental health services. Fortunately, or unfortunately, the push for a CAC in Montgomery County came after a horrific case of child sexual abuse in Montgomery County.

In the 1990's Sasha was a little boy on the Main Line, an affluent middle-class suburb of Philadelphia. His uncle, his father's brother, was a prominent Jewish religious leader at a wealthy synagogue in NYC, and would often make the quick 2-hour drive to visit, and unbeknownst to the parents was repeatedly sexually abusing Sasha from the time he was 4 years old. This gifted and laughing child became a 7 y/o who was angry and suicidal. When the abuse was finally disclosed to a child psychiatrist, Sasha's father told his wife for the first time: "That is what he did to me as a child; if I had any idea he would do it to Sasha I would never have let him in the house."

It took dozens of interviews, *over 10 years*, with detectives, prosecutors and social workers, at police stations, medical offices, and the courthouse to get to trial. Prior to trial Sasha's mother made an incredible statement to the prosecutor, which encapsulates the repeated trauma to victims who are repeatedly interviewed: "What happened to my children was horrific, but your system is worse." After 10 years, defense counsel offered a plea deal where the offender would admit guilt, but not serve any jail time. Although the prosecutor wanted to take the case to trial, Sasha accepted at the age of 17 only so he could move on with his life.

50% of cases of Mission Kids involve abusers who are family members, and intergenerational child sexual abuse is a known potential to occur following child abuse that is not treated. Also, without a CAC it is much harder to get a case successfully prosecuted at trial, and time to trial can be much longer.

Sasha's case led to the founding of Mission Kids Child Advocacy Center. We opened our doors in 2009 and changed the system for victims of child abuse in Montgomery County. Like all other CACs, we facilitate multi-disciplinary team (MDT) responses to victims so they do not need to undergo multiple interviews with all of the systems involved in a response. The MDT is the heart of all CACs; it is the collaborative effort, bringing professionals out of their silo's, that adds dimension to investigations, changing what first appears to be black or white to shades of gray.

Our site is child-friendly, and the waiting room has stuffed animals and games; after the interview a child is allowed to take a stuffed animal with them, and it is not unusual if a case goes to trial to see this toy accompany a child to court and support them during their testimony. Some photos of Mission Kids to are at the end of this packet.

When MK was begun, it was envisioned that the need would be for 250-300 forensic interviews/year, and it was hoped that we could find funding to eventually include family advocacy and mental health resources. In the **last 15 years our services have exceeded all expectations:**

- We perform on average double the originally anticipated amount, 600 forensic interviews/year, in English *and* Spanish, and have completed a total of 7, 000 interviews. In addition to victims of sexual and serious physical abuse and witnesses to violence, we also see victims of commercial sexual exploitation (CSEC), who were never contemplated in 2009. Our current site has 3 FI rooms, set up for both older and younger children. MDT members, including police, social workers and prosecutors, watch from one of 3 near-by observation rooms via closed-circuit TV, getting the benefit of a live interview without re-traumatizing the child, or having the child feel interrogated by multiple interviewers.
- Our 6 family advocates, both English *and* Spanish speaking, have worked with over 9,000 non-offending care-givers, providing support and resources throughout the life of the case.
- 95% of prosecutions from the Mont. Co. DA's Office on our cases are successful. More importantly, once a forensic interview is completed, there are more plea

bargains and fewer cases going to court when Mission Kids is used, sparing the child the stress of a trial, and having to confront their abuser in person in a courtroom.

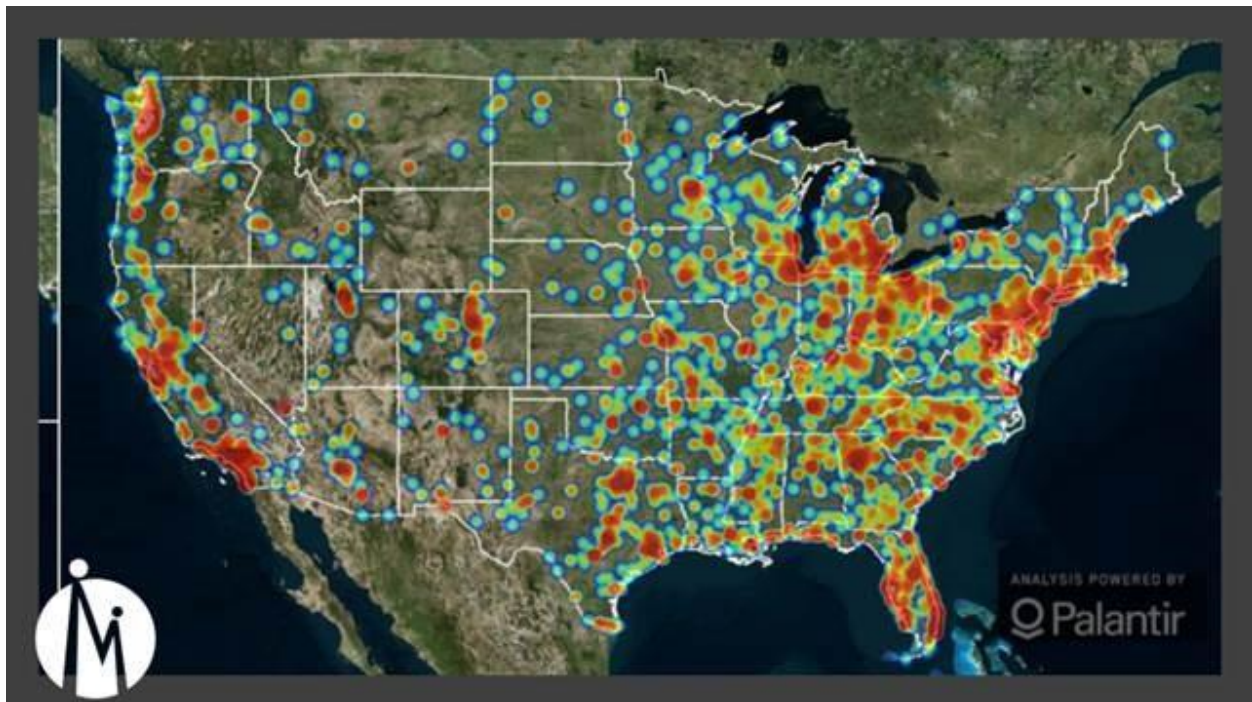
- By partnering with a community mental health agency, we have 5 on-site MH therapists, and agreements with other qualified professionals across the county. We found that when we refer children to therapists not on-site that many did not attend and therefore did not receive mental health services. We have a higher rate of having children attend therapy by having services on-site. *However, children may still need to wait 3-6 months for an appointment as the pay at community-based agencies is not high enough to keep fully trained therapists incentivized from moving to private practice. Moreover, at Mission Kids we also need to pay for the space, computers, furniture, and overhead without reimbursement as we are not a mental health provider.*
- We are also fortunate to be able to partner with Children's Hospital of Philadelphia for referral of victims to receive specialized medical treatment. We still have relatively few children who accept medical referrals, as just going to one more appointment can be overwhelming; *we are hoping to be able to have medical services on site one day, so more children will accept medical services, but as of now we just don't have the space, funds or resources.*
- We started in 1,800 sq. ft., and have outgrown our current location of 6,000 sq. ft. And, you may know that Montgomery County is a rather long county east to west. Our office is located a short drive from the courthouse, but we found that many families in the Western part of the county needed to travel over an hour for services. Even though the Task Force post-Sandusky recommended a CAC within 2 hours of every child, we saw that we were definitely losing children whose families did not have the means or ability to take time off from work to travel that far. So, with community support, donated leased space from a Mental Health Agency partner, and grants from the National Children's Alliance and PCCD, we opened a second location in Pottstown 1 year ago, and have already seen 100 cases there. All of the children benefit from same services, resources and MDT members as our main locations. *However, using and supporting a second site stretches our staff, and we need funding to maintain and sustain this second location on an on-going basis.*

The National Children's Alliance (NCA), the national accreditation body for CACs, based on the work of CACs across the country, this year added 3 new optional standards for accreditation. Those standards cover commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC), prevention education, and physical abuse. Mission Kids has our 5-year re-Accreditation site visit next week, and we are the first CAC in the entire US to ask to be accredited in the 10 mandatory standards + all 3 of the new optional ones.

Regarding the new **physical abuse standard**, since our inception we have seen cases of serious physical abuse at MK. Beginning in 2023 we have added cases of children who are too young for forensic interviews, including cases of fatality and near-fatality. Physical abuse cases now make

up 25-30% of our approximately 600 cases/year. These cases are also examples of how CACs are pivotal for facilitation of child abuse cases among professionals, and the constellation of services that are provided on behalf of children well beyond the forensic interview.

Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC): We have served over 150 children suspected of being commercially sexually exploited, including cases of commercial sexual abuse materials a/k/a CSAM or child porn. Human trafficking happens in Montgomery County, all of PA, and the country, it is not just a foreign problem. The map below is from Polaris, the national human trafficking hotline. This is their most recent map from 2019, and you can see how a lot of PA, including rural areas, have reports and hotspots of trafficking. These are ONLY the cases called in, and this data is 4 years old; even then the entire eastern half of the state is covered; you can follow the interstate east to west across the state, into the entire Allegheny County area, west into Ohio, and south into Maryland.



The case which made our MDT aware of CSEC started with a traffic stop in 2016 in the early morning hours. An adolescent girl in inappropriate clothing was in the back seat of a car, was not related to the 2 men in the front seats, who both had rap sheets, and they had no good explanation for where they were going. The teen was brought to MK soon afterwards, and high-level team members came to watch from the MDT observation room. Our forensic interviewer approached it as any other case, and started with asking the adolescent if anyone was worried about her safety. The child refused to answer, cursed at the interviewer, and claimed that everything that she did was voluntary. Of course, this child could not consent to being repeatedly raped, but she had been so traumatized and broken by her traffickers that she believed that she was consenting to her abuse. The interview could not be used in court, the evidence against the

alleged perpetrators fell apart, and worst of all, trust was so broken with this child that we could not help her. The MDT knew that there was a different response needed for these children who were repeatedly abused and traumatized, and severed from all of their support systems.

We know that factors that make a child vulnerable to being trafficked include being part of the child welfare system and if **they have already been a victim of child sexual abuse; this is yet another reason CACs are so important.** Under a grant in from DOJ in 2018 Mission Kids, with our MDT, developed policies to respond to CSEC cases, and we have trained CACs and responders across the state about CSEC and how to structure responses. CSEC cases are very complicated, time and personnel heavy. Children need a collaborative response that involves not only the CAC MDT, but community groups, the judicial system, JPO, and intensive mental health treatment. *Most communities do not have the time, funds, and man-power needed to be trained in and develop responses in already stretched systems to respond adequately to these cases, and the services provided at Mission Kids hinge on VOCA funding, which is in jeopardy for 2024.*

Prevention Education: We need prevention education across the state. Mission Kids' prevention education programs help reduce the number of children victimized in our community. Our team of prevention educators develop and deploy teaching modules that increase community awareness of abuse. Using programs like "ROAR" and "Safe Touches," our team has reached over 30,000 children. These programs are evidence-based and have been proven to decrease rates of abuse and increase rates of reporting. After one lesson, a child understood that something that happened to them was 'not okay', and told a teacher; the child came to Mission Kids, and law enforcement and prosecutors were able to immediately intervene. Ironically, the more Prevention Education that we provide, the more cases will be referred, and the greater our need for resources. *We need to have funds to maintain our prevention education staff if we are going to make a difference in our county and across the state.*

In order to ensure that the CAC model continues to meet best practices, we create and participate in original research projects to help team members better respond to child abuse, and our results have been published in peer-reviewed journals. One research issue is what is often called sibling sexual abuse, and is part of a wider category of what is now called Youth with Problematic Sexualized Behaviors (YPSB). Children and youth who engage in problematic or illegal sexual behavior often have few options for treatment and support, and because the abuse is often in a sibling or family group these cases can tear families apart, and without proper support, these youth may also offend again. The research with our MDT has led to their support in implementing a community and clinical program that provides evidenced based treatment in a holistic way by supporting the youth who is offending, their families, and the victim youth, with services that are based on their needs, while bolstering protective factors and family bonds. We are excited to bring this program to Montgomery County, both as a treatment and prevention measure.

Every region of the US **except** for the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic Region has a training center dedicated to the training and education needs of responders to child abuse. Since child abuse and CSEC do not follow county and state boundaries, and to meet all of our

critical needs, Mission Kids is committed to building and operating a premier Regional Training Facility and a new co-located CAC. This training facility is intended for child-serving professionals throughout Pennsylvania and the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic region. The training center will include a mock courtroom and apartment, and forensic interviewer training rooms to offer experiential training for professionals to best be able to respond to cases in their counties without the need to leave Pennsylvania.

With all that we do, there are still so many more victims who we have yet to reach. Most of our forensic interviewers, victim advocates and other program staff are funded with VOCA funding, which is in jeopardy for next year. *Cuts to the VOCA program from Washington will certainly impact the direct service programs that we provide, and projects that reach beyond our borders in CSEC, youth with problematic sexualized behavior, and leadership and advocacy, that help all MDTs and victims.*

The best description to sum up the change that Mission Kids has made in Montgomery County comes from our MDT partners. As our partners experienced all the benefits of a CAC response for their investigation, the child, and the family, Mission Kids has become a verb, and they routinely say, "Let's Mission Kids the case." The CAC as a verb needs to be a part of the response for child sex abuse for every child in PA.

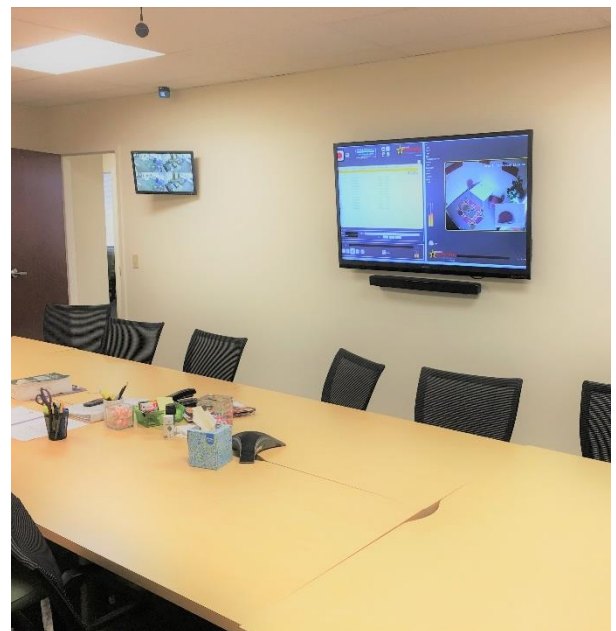
Sasha grew up to be a film maker, and based on hundreds of hours of home video, including footage of his abuser, produced an award-winning documentary about his abuse, healing, and the need for the CAC model. Please take 90 minutes and watch *Rewind*, which is available on Peacock and Amazon Prime. The 3-minute trailer for the movie can be found on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMeCgJnJSDc>

Thank you for your time and interest, and please do not hesitate to reach out with any questions.

Abbie Newman, R.N., J.D.
CEO, External and Global Affairs
Mission Kids Child Advocacy Center
484-687-2990
www.missionkidscac.org
anewman@missionkidscac.org



A Child-Friendly Center





Children are Interviewed in an Age-Appropriate Room

