

**Testimony of Richard Servello, M.P.S., CAC Program Director, Blair County Children's Advocacy Center,
to Senate Aging and Youth Committee 8/8/2023**

Thank you Chairwoman Ward, Minority Chair Collett, and members of the Committee for the opportunity to submit written testimony and speak about the importance of Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs) in the Commonwealth. I hope the information presented and discussed is helpful in understanding the life altering effects of trauma and how CACs dramatically reduce that trauma.

Importance of a CAC

Child abuse does not discriminate against anyone. More people than you probably realize have experienced some form of child abuse. Most commonly discussed is child sexual abuse. Child sexual abuse has the most severe and lifelong effects. These impacts cover a spectrum of types: psychological, behavioral, interpersonal, and physical. All of which can be delayed in manifestation, because of the confusion a child may feel about the abuse. Whether a child immediately recognizes the experience as abuse or it takes until adulthood, they all share similar risk of developing mental and physical health concerns.

Common health issues child sexual abuse survivors face are post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, eating disorders, risky sexual behavior, revictimization, sexual dysfunction, and relationship issues. Studies have shown that any level of support and intervention for a survivor can have a direct influence on the long-term outcomes.

This is where the importance of CACs lies. The CAC can be the first type of intervention to a child victim. A child friendly, neutral environment to limit the traumatic impact of addressing the abuse. The CAC and the constellation of services initiated there is an irreplaceable thread within the fabric of the multidisciplinary approach to child abuse investigations. Children and families are dealing with a wide range of emotions and reactions, during these times without being worried about the interactions they may be faced with. The support and attention provided through the CAC are paramount in that child's and their family's first steps towards healing.

History and Context of CAC in Blair County

The Center for Child Justice, Blair County's CAC, opened as a program under Family Services Incorporated's umbrella in September 2017 with a program director, a full-time forensic interviewer and a part time administrative assistant. Since that time, the part time administrative assistant position has been dissolved, and a fulltime CAC coordinator has been hired. The CAC had a casual/as-needed forensic interviewer, but now the program director and CAC coordinator are trained interviewers to be used as needed. The CAC also contracts with Blair Family Solutions who provide mental health case management for child abuse cases at the CAC. The Blair County CAC only serves Blair County at this time, with the occasional courtesy interview for other counties or states. At this time, our CAC provides forensic interviews of children, and victim advocates are present for the child and family at every interview. In July 2020, we began providing non-emergency medical examinations for sexual abuse cases on site.

Our regular hours are Monday through Friday from 8:30 am – 4:30 pm, but we are available anytime for emergency forensic interviews through an on-call number which the CAC program director answers 24/7. The Blair County CAC is now an accredited member of National Children’s Alliance. After years of dedicated work, our accreditation was awarded this past January. While our CAC is still young, we are proud of the things we have accomplished in the last six years for the children and families in Blair County.

Blair County has a population of approximately 122,000 people, of whom over 22% are 18 years of age or younger. The county is comprised of 50,200 households whose median income is \$54,000. Approximately 12% of the population lives below the poverty line. Geographically, most of the county’s 526 square miles can be described as rural or very rural, although there does exist one high-density urban center and several medium-density small communities. The CAC itself is located in the high-density urban center of Altoona. Based upon 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2017 referrals for CAC services, a Blair County CAC was estimated to see at a minimum, 97 children during its first full year of operation. However, as stated previously, the CAC conducted 161 interviews in 2018, 205 in 2019, and 90 in 2020 so far (which is low because of COVID-19).

UPMC Altoona Hospital generously donates appropriate office space and related support services for use as a Blair County CAC. Located within a medical office park directly across from UPMC Altoona hospital campus, this 1,760 sq.ft. office space includes a large reception area and eight additional partitioned rooms suitable for forensic interview, team observation, medical examination, case planning, administration, and storage. This in-kind contribution includes utilities and maintenance and carries an estimated annual market value of nearly \$35,000. The office park provides adequate parking, unobtrusive egress, and an accessible location in the middle of the county. The office space is accessible for individuals with disabilities. The CAC is decorated in a child-friendly manner and contains child-friendly furniture, furnishings and play therapy items.

Blair County is experiencing serious drug and mental health problems as a community. The intersectionality of trauma and substance abuse disorder and trauma and mental health issues is not always recognized in our community. As, I mentioned before, CACs help reduce the traumatic impact of abuse and subsequently helps to reduce the risk for survivors to develop substance abuse disorders and lowers the likelihood of severe mental health issues.

Services Provided

The Blair County CAC provides forensic interviews, forensic medical exams, mental health referrals, and community education/outreach. Our forensic interviewer has been trained in the NCAC forensic interviewing protocol, the APSAC protocol, advanced forensic interviewing through NCAC, interviewing individuals who do not speak, interviewing child victims of human trafficking , presenting evidence during a forensic interview, among other trainings. Thus, the children referred to our CAC in Blair County are receiving a top-notch forensic interview by an experienced forensic interviewer. In addition, the forensic interviewer has provided testimony as an expert in 9 court proceedings in Blair County.

The CAC provides forensic medical exams on site as part of the constellation of services. The CAC has a physician assistant available for medical exams as needed through a Memorandum of Understanding with Altoona Pediatric Healthcare Associates. The PA is trained in the National Protocol

for Sexual Abuse Medical Forensic Examinations: Pediatrics and all related training through the International Association of Forensic Nurses.

During every interview and medical exam, the CAC works with the Victim Services Program, another program under the Family Services Incorporated umbrella to provide victim advocacy and support. This includes but is limited to: accompaniment to the CAC, supportive counseling, court accompaniment to any and all proceedings, referrals for additional services, and assistance with filing protection orders (Protection from Abuse, PFA; Sexual Violence Protection Order, SVPO; or Protection from Intimidation, PFI), if applicable for that specific case. These services are provided based on the empowerment model and are suggested with the highest level of informed consent, but things are never done for the children or their families by the advocate.

We currently contract with Blair Family Solutions to provide mental health case management to each child and family who comes through the CAC. This, unfortunately, is not accepted by every family eligible, and sometimes families are not eligible, due to limitations within the requirements. Children without a mental health diagnosis and without insurance are not able to start case management services.

The CAC has shifted time and energy into community education and outreach. This gives us an opportunity to grow our presence in the community as experts in child abuse, child abuse interviewing, and child abuse prevention. Making sure the community is educated to the reality of child sexual abuse, human trafficking, and other forms of victimization is paramount to building community understanding of the importance of CACs and the services they provide. Our efforts so far include, presenting to high school age students at Teen Power Day and elementary and middle school age children during a summer program called CHOICES, both held in Altoona.

Demographics and Service Numbers

We are consistently trying to determine the expected demographic characteristics of our center. However, in 2018, we served 17 children aged 0-6 years, 30 children aged 7-12 years, and 24 children aged 13-18 years; 57 child victims of sexual abuse, 16 child victims of physical abuse, 1 child victim of neglect, 2 child victims of drug endangerment and 4 other; 58 white children, 4 Black/African American children, 1 Hispanic/Latino child, 1 Other and 7 Undisclosed.

In 2019, we served 76 children aged 0-6 years, 95 children aged 7-12 years, and 63 children aged 13-18 years; 150 child victims of sexual abuse, 64 child victims of physical abuse, 10 child victim of neglect, 8 child victims of drug endangerment and 52 other; 191 white children, 18 Black/African American children, 0 Hispanic/Latino child, and 1 Other.

During 2020, we had anticipated serving approximately 230-250 children however COVID-19 caused major disruptions to child abuse reporting and service provisions. we served 41 children aged 0-6 years, 77 children aged 7-12 years, and 52 children aged 13-18 years; 100 child victims of sexual abuse, 31 child victims of physical abuse, 14 child victim of neglect, 8 child victims of drug endangerment and 42 other; 161 white children, 7 Black/African American children, 1 Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1 Other.

Since COVID-19 to now we have not seen our numbers as high as we did during our initial years. The damage done by COVID-19 includes relationships between MDT partners, staffing issues in all disciplines, and overall referrals for CAC services.

In 2021, we served 39 children aged 0-6 years, 91 children aged 7-12 years, and 76 children aged 13-18 years; 120 child victims of sexual abuse, 51 child victims of physical abuse, 17 child victim of neglect, 7 child victims of drug endangerment and 24 other; 187 white children, 6 Black/African American children, 2 Hispanic/Latino child, 1 American Indian/Alaska Native, and 10 Other.

In 2022, we served 32 children aged 0-6 years, 63 children aged 7-12 years, and 68 children aged 13-18 years; 115 child victims of sexual abuse, 35 child victims of physical abuse, 1 child victim of neglect, 2 child victims of drug endangerment and 22 other; 149 white children, 7 Black/African American children, 3 Hispanic/Latino child, and 4 Other.

Funding

The CAC currently receives funding from the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD), local fundraising, CYF billing, and community support. Our funding from PCCD currently comes from Endowment Act funding and CAC Director grant to pay full-time wages and benefits of the CAC director, forensic interviewer and CAC coordinator. CYF billing covers the cost of all CYF referred forensic interviews. Local fundraising has been difficult over the past couple years, but has been able to help with secondary things aside from direct services. Medical exam costs are covered through Victim's Compensation Assistance Program (VCAP).

We are excited to be receiving partial funds from PCCD and UPMC to help create a Trauma Informed Network in Blair County. This funding will allow the CAC to upgrade our interview room and observation room with a new computer for recording the interviews, two new cameras, a new microphone, and a new television for the team members to watch the interviews on. All of this equipment is currently what was installed in 2017 when the CAC opened.

MDT Collaboration/Partnership

The multidisciplinary investigative team (MDIT) in Blair County is trying to do the best we can given the current situations of each discipline. Blair County has 19 different police departments and jurisdictions including the Pennsylvania State Police. Typically, the city of Altoona carries the majority of child abuse cases while the other smaller departments handle cases as they occur in their respective geographic areas. We continue to struggle with turnover in law enforcement. This turnover leads to inconsistency in who is investigating cases even within the same department. The Altoona Police Department only has four full-time detectives, for 9.792 square miles and 44,000 people.

The Blair County Children, Youth and Families Office is currently dealing with a staffing crisis which is effecting the CAC and the number of referrals received. Blair County is still in desperate need of full-time CYF caseworkers.

Our biggest hurdle at the CAC with the MDIT is coordinating each person from their respective discipline to be at the scheduled forensic interview in person. Working around the schedules of six different agencies, emergency situations for law enforcement, and restrictions in eligibility for mental health services proves to be a major challenge.

Blair County has and uses a county wide MDIT Protocol that explains each discipline's roles and responsibilities within the team, how cases should be handled (protocol included as an appendix), and what parts of the Child Protective Services Law (CPSL) and Criminal Statutes were used to determine

mandatory versus discretionary CAC referrals. This protocol is a roadmap for each agency to know exactly what should happen to ensure the best possible experience for the child/teen and their family. In recent months, we have struggled to maintain the integrity of the protocol while dealing with the turnover in each agency, lack of staff, increased crime, and generally busy schedules.

Blair County CAC Needs

The biggest need in Blair County is agency buy in to the MDIT and CAC models. There needs to be accountability for agencies who agree to the protocols actually abide by them. This, however, requires adequate staffing for each agency, reduced turnover, and resources to provide services without certain restrictions. We also need funding. Consistent and dedicated funding for CACs would be beneficial for Blair County because of the rural area and necessity of services. Mandates for CAC usage in every child abuse investigation. Requirements within training for each discipline (law enforcement, district attorney's offices, Children, Youth and Families offices, medical, mental health, and victim advocacy). Requirements for judges to be trained on CACs and the importance of using one.

Conclusion

Every child deserves to be heard and Children's Advocacy Centers are the best place it. The constellation of services, the collaborative approach, and the support for healing all start at the CAC. The Blair County CAC makes a difference in children and families everyday through any of our services. Children and teens are experiencing serious abuse every day and I am proud to be part of the team that seeks to address the abuse and ultimately prevent it.

We, in Blair County, hope to address the misconceptions and misunderstanding around child abuse to make sure we have an educated community. We must work as a community to make sure children are safe and for those who aren't we must work to help them heal and limit the long-term effects of the abuse. As an advocate, I would never talk to clients about "getting over" their victimization. We would discuss tools and skills to help them "get through" their experience. It is my hope that the information presented in this testimony helps with your understanding of the importance of Children's Advocacy Centers. Nelson Mandela once said, "We owe our children, the most vulnerable citizens in any society, a life free from violence and fear."

Thank you again Chairwoman Ward, Minority Chair Collett, and all committee members for this opportunity.