



**Testimony of Chris Kirchner, MSW, Children's Advocacy Centers of PA,  
to Senate Committee on Aging and Youth, 8/8/2023**

- 1) Good morning Senator Ward, Senator Collett, and all members of the Senate Aging and Youth Committee. Thank you for inviting us here today to talk about PA's Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs). It is an honor to have this opportunity.
  - My name is Chris Kirchner, and I am the ED of CACs of PA, a state association that supports our 41 programs, and works to develop CACs in counties where there are none. We provide training and technical assistance to ensure our CACs achieve and maintain national accreditation. We work to develop CACs where none exist, and we promote the CAC collaborative response across the state.
  - Our goal is to have a CAC available to every child in the state who needs one, with the full complement of services available in a timely manner, within no more than one hour drive for all children.
  - I've been in this role for the past three years, and prior to that I was the ED of the CAC in Philadelphia, the Philadelphia Children's Alliance, for 28 years.
  - I will be providing an overview of the CAC model and the status of CACs in PA, and then my colleagues joining me here today will provide their perspectives as a CAC Director, Caregiver of a child who went to a CAC, member of an MDIT, and representative from PCCD.
- 2) CAC Overview Video

When I first came to CACs of Pa we focused on raising awareness of CACs in PA. Part of that initiative included creating several videos explaining the work of CACs. I'd now like to show a 5-minute video featuring individuals from CACs across the state talking about their work.
- 3) Why do we need CACs?
  - Although CACs now serve both sexual abuse and physical abuse cases, the first CAC was founded as a result of the challenges presented by child sexual abuse cases, and the increasing number of those cases coming to the attention of child welfare and law enforcement:
    - Fear, Shame, Self-Blame, Confusion
    - In the majority of cases, children knew the alleged offender, adding to pressure not to disclose
    - Delayed disclosure is common
    - Perpetrators groom and manipulate both children and their caregivers
  - Many agencies must intervene when there is an allegation of abuse: Child welfare, law enforcement, prosecution, medical and mental health providers. Multiple, uncoordinated investigations can result in 10+ interviews, and confusion for children and families, as well as investigators.

- Much is at stake when a child comes forward with a disclosure of abuse. If the child doesn't feel comfortable disclosing their abuse, they will likely return to the abusive situation. We know so much more now than we did in 1985, when the first CAC was founded, about the potential life-long impact of abuse on children-and as I said in the video, when a child comes forward, we owe it to them to provide a response that supports them to talk about what happened, so they can get the help they need to be safe, and to heal from their abuse.
- Prosecutor Bud Cramer, who founded the first CAC, shared that part of his motivation for starting the first CAC, was one little boy who, when questioned by DA Cramer about his abuse, responded "why don't you grownups talk to each other?"

#### 4) CACs across the United States

- As communities across the country began to recognize the challenges in responding to CSA, they began to study this new model, and eventually DA Cramer was elected to Congress, where he served for 18 years. With bi-partisan support for the CAC approach, he secured federal funding to be passed through OOJDP to create a national office in Washington D.C., and to provide funding for CAC development.
- There are now more than 900 CACs across the country, and all 50 states have a State Chapter supporting CACs and developing new programs.

#### 5) National Standards-The National Children's Alliance in Washington D.C. is the accrediting body of CACs and was established in 1992 with the initial OJJDP funding.

- Ten required Standards and Three new Optional Standards for CACs (Attachment)
  - Centrally located child-friendly facility
  - Collaborative response documented in formal protocols to ensure cross agency information-sharing and shared decision making through the life of a case
  - Specially trained forensic interviewers who are neutral fact finders and can talk with children while MDIT members observe and gather information for their investigations
  - Victim advocates who support children and non-offending caregivers who support children throughout the life of a case
  - Medical evaluations conducted by specially trained providers
  - Long-term trauma therapy and mental health services provided on site or through linkage agreements
  - Regular case review and case tracking across all agencies and systems
  - Commitment to culturally responsive, child-focused services
  - Optional Standards- Physical Abuse, Prevention, Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children

- Four levels of accreditation with the National Children’s Alliance
  - Accredited-29 in PA
  - Associate-5 in PA
  - Satellite-4 in PA
  - Affiliate-3 in PA

6) CACs in PA

- In 2022, an average of 50 children a day walked through the front door of a CAC. On the attached report, you can see that 15,000 children received services at a CAC in 2022. Two thirds girls and one third boys, all ages. Types of cases seen included sexual abuse, physical abuse, child witness to violence, drug endangered children and others.
- There were 11,938 forensic interviews conducted at a CAC, and all of these children would have received victim support services, 5,859 medical evaluations provided, and 3,458 children referred to therapy.

7) We have come a long way over the past decade in expanding CAC services in the state. Included in your attachments is a chart showing the growth of CACs between 2013 and 2022. In 2013 there were 21 CACs and they served 9,525 children, and in 2022 there were 41 CACs and they served 15,735 children.

8) But we still have some challenges:

- Not every child in the state has access to a CAC
- There are no state-wide requirements that CACs be used, and so individual investigators may decide to conduct their own investigations, without collaborating at the CAC
- Although we have many excellent medical experts and resources in PA, they are not always available in every county
- Mental health services are critical for a child’s healing, and these are also not available for every child who needs it
- Funding- Last year we requested a \$4.5 million line item from the state for CACs. We did this because many of our programs struggle with funding. Each program gets \$47,000 from the birth certificate fees that were increased after the Sandusky case. Many CACs receive some level of funding through C&Y needs-based budget. The majority of CACs must do their own private sector fundraising. Funds support salaries of Team Coordinators, Forensic Interviewers, Victim Advocates, and Therapists. Funds are also needed for medical evaluations. Cases that are Law Enforcement only (no C&Y involvement) often have no funding to support services. CACs need to have staff capacity to enable them to respond 24/7 when reports come in, to best support Law Enforcement and Children and Youth investigators. We will continue to seek additional funding sources so that CACs can provide a full array of CAC services to all children who need them.

Materials attached:

- a. Map showing location of CACs
- b. Listing of CACs and locations
- c. NCA Standards
- d. PA statistics 2013-2022
- e. PA statistics 2022
- f. CAC Flow Chart diagram
- g. PennCAC brochure
- h. SHINE campaign and 9/15 Walk