

Center that assists child abuse victims in Berks now under county supervision

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At the Children's Alliance Center in the Berks County Services Center are, from left, Laura E. Kemp, victim advocate; Heilyn Perez, forensic interviewer; and Amy Sundstrom, director. The center is a program that helps child abuse victims in Berks County. It is now being operated by the district attorney's office after 16 years of being run by Opportunity House.

BEN HASTY — READING EAGLE

A program that helps hundreds of child abuse victims in Berks County each year is now being operated by the district attorney's office after 16 years of being run by Opportunity House.

The Children's Alliance Center of Berks County, which interviews children and supports them and their families, switched to the responsibility of the office of John T. Adams on Jan. 1. The county commissioners approved the change.

The center will continue to do the same good work it's been doing and doesn't plan any major changes other than enhancing what's already been effective, said new director Amy Sundstrom, a Berks assistant district attorney.

Sundstrom has specialized in victim services, supervised the DA's victim-witness unit, and served as a social worker for the Children's Home of Reading.

"As the new director of the CAC, I will strive to reduce the trauma that children and families suffer from child abuse and lead them to a path of recovery," Sundstrom said.

The center was created in 2005 to provide victims 18 and younger with a private, safe and supportive environment where they could tell their story to a forensic interviewer trained to ask questions without re-traumatizing the child, Adams said.

Interviews are now taking place in the Berks County Services Center in Reading, other professionals from law enforcement, children and youth services, victim advocacy agencies, and the medical and mental health fields can watch from a video feed in an adjacent room, suggesting questions to the interviewer.

The center also helps arrange post-interview support such as medical exams for the victims and counseling for them and their families.

That child advocacy center model became the norm across Pennsylvania and nationwide so that young victims wouldn't have to repeat the same details to multiple child abuse professionals.

With all those entities working together and consulting with the interviewer, the program is effective in gathering the information necessary to help the child, investigating any crimes committed and prosecuting the abusers when necessary, Sundstrom said.

About 95% of the children the center works with are victims of sexual abuse, and the rest are victims of physical assault or witnesses to violent crimes.

The switch to the DA's office happened in part because Melissa Haydt, the center's director for the last eight years and Opportunity House vice president, retired at the end of 2020.

"The CAC has served thousands of sexually abused children and their families over these years, and I truly believe the district attorney's office will continue to deliver the same quality of services to the families of Berks County," she said.

Running the center was also never really part of Opportunity House's true mission of educating, housing, feeding and empowering those who are struggling financially, so it also makes more sense for it to be run by Adams' office, said Modesto Fiume, Opportunity House president.

"When it was starting, no one wanted to take it on, so we did for the good of the community," he said, thanking the staff and donors who got the center through its early years.

The center is now funded mostly by federal, state and national grants.

Fiume said Sundstrom is a great choice to run the program because she's worked with it in the past and will provide continuity.

Adams said that like other communities across the country, Berks is plagued by child sexual and physical abuse, which makes the center's work so important in bringing about successful prosecutions or other outcomes in those cases.

"My office looks forward to taking on the everyday challenges and operation of the CAC, and I am confident that we will be able to maintain its high standards," he said.

"Additionally, I would like to thank the members of our multidisciplinary team for their continued dedication and response to victims of child abuse."

The center has one full-time bilingual interviewer, and cut a part-time interviewer position as a cost-saving move during its switch to the county. The center has access to two county detectives who are trained in conducting those interviews, Sundstrom said.

The center averaged 417 interviews annually from 2014 through 2018 before the number dropped to 322 in 2019. Officials weren't clear what caused the drop.

Then there were only 221 interviews in 2020 and the reason was the COVID-19 pandemic, Haydt said, which likely cut some child victims off from those who could have reported their abuse, such as teachers and guidance counselors.

Sundstrom said it's impossible to say how many children in Berks were unable to report their abuse or have it recognized by mandated reporters during the shutdown, but she expects there will be a rise in cases when more children return to in-person learning in schools and other programs.