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**CHILDREN'S  
LAW OFFICE**

# Insights

A glimpse into timely topics affecting the investigation and prosecution of child abuse in South Carolina

## Coordinating Services to Protect Children: The Children's Advocacy Center Model

In 1985 a District Attorney in Alabama, frustrated with how child sexual abuse was investigated in his jurisdiction, decided to take action. The solution he landed upon was to create a single place where all agencies could coordinate their services. This new entity became known as a Children's Advocacy Center (CAC), and the model created in Alabama soon spread around the country. Because they are becoming more prominent in South Carolina, this article briefly describes how CACs can assist other child protection professionals.

A CAC serves two primary functions. First, a CAC provides a physical location in which to interview children in a child-friendly setting. Most centers have a waiting room with a play area, interview rooms with child-sized furniture, and an overall friendly atmosphere. Second, most CACs employ specialized staff such as forensic interviewers, pediatricians with expertise in child maltreatment, and therapists to work with children receiving follow-up services.

In addition to providing a comfortable environment and specialized services, a CAC can help local child protection professionals in many other ways.

*A CAC can help eliminate duplication of interviews.* For example, a single interview can be conducted at a center with law enforcement and DSS observing by video relay. Both law enforcement and DSS have the opportunity to communicate with the interviewer to ensure that all necessary information is asked. By providing a single location for all agencies to observe an interview, each agency can participate without the need for multiple separate interviews.

*A CAC can facilitate multi-disciplinary teamwork.* In Richland County, for example, CAC professionals, police investigators, and DSS workers meet every three weeks to staff cases and share ideas about the course of action. This sharing of expertise should produce more informed and better decisions. Of course, while a CAC can supplement the efforts of individual agencies, it cannot replace any of the agency functions. Thus, a law enforcement officer may observe an interview with a child, but after the interview, the officer still must conduct a full criminal investigation.

*Continued on page 2 . . .*

## Finding Words South Carolina: 'Absolutely the best and most mentally taxing course I've ever taken'

Glowing reviews followed the first offering of a forensic interviewing course sponsored by the Children's Law Office. As expressed by an assistant solicitor who was among the group of 25 professionals to complete the course in March, it was "absolutely the best and most mentally taxing course I've ever taken."

*Finding Words South Carolina* is an intensive, practice-oriented training session in which participants must:

- read nearly 200 pages of professional literature;
- learn a specific protocol for interviewing children and understand the rationale behind the protocol;
- conduct a 30-minute interview of an adult actor who is playing the role of a sexually abused child; and
- demonstrate mastery of the material on a written exam.

Although the course is challenging, the benefit is immediate and significant: those who complete this course are provided the tools to conduct quality and legally defensible forensic interviews of children.

In addition to the interview training, *Finding Words South Carolina* also provides a unique opportunity for local teams to develop their multi-disciplinary relationship. Participants are required to attend as part of a local team

consisting, at a minimum, of law enforcement, solicitor, and DSS front-line professionals. Thus, all professionals in a community spend a week working together as they learn the same interviewing protocol.

*Finding Words South Carolina* will be offered two more times this year and three times per year in the future. To apply for the next session, to be conducted August 6-10 in Columbia, you should:

1. Contact professionals in your county who conduct forensic interviews of children. Only those who conduct forensic interviews as part of a local team may apply.
2. Contact Charles Phipps at the Children's Law Office for an application: 803-777-1979. Applications must be received by June 15.
3. Be aware that not everyone who applies is guaranteed to be accepted. Because of its intensive, practice-oriented nature, class size is limited and the application process is competitive.

*Finding Words South Carolina* is conducted by the Children's Law Office and the Richland County CAC (known as the ARC) in cooperation with the National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse (a project of the National District Attorneys Association).

## ... Children's Advocacy Centers, Continued

A CAC can help minimize trauma to a child. Allison DeFelice, with the Richland County center, notes that children often associate police stations and DSS offices with trouble and removal from their family. By providing a neutral, friendly environment, children can be more at ease during a potentially difficult interview.

A CAC can provide a reminder to state agencies to be child-friendly. CACs are staffed by child-focused professionals whose goal is to help professionals respond sensitively to the needs of children who are brought into the child protection system. A CAC's child-friendly focus should not be confused with an inability to be impartial or objective. CACs are designed to provide a neutral atmosphere for assessing cases while remaining sensitive to the needs of children.

Bud Cramer, the District Attorney who introduced the first CAC model, is now a U.S. Representative working on children's issues at the national level. His efforts have helped create a new philosophy of children's advocacy and child protection across the country. Representative Cramer's accomplishments illustrate that collaborating at the local level is a powerful means of protecting children in a community.

## CACs in S.C. Working Toward National Accreditation

The National Children's Alliance, a membership organization for Children's Advocacy Centers, awards full NCA membership to CACs that comply with national standards. In addition to other things, the local center must:

- have a child friendly facility;
- work as part of a local multi-disciplinary team;
- conduct forensic interviews;
- either provide or make referrals for therapy and victim support; and
- monitor case progress and outcomes.

Several CACs in South Carolina are full members; others are working toward that status. Following is a list of state CACs with an indication of their NCA affiliation.

**Anderson.** Anderson-Oconee Children's Center, Mary Skeen, Director. Program is under development. 864-231-7273.

**Beaufort.** Children's Advocacy Center Task Force, Colleen Page, Chairperson. NCA associate member. 843-524-2256.

**Charleston.** Lowcountry Children's Center, Libby Ralston, Director. NCA full member. 843-723-3600.

**Columbia.** Assessment and Resource Center, Allison DeFelice, clinical director. NCA full member. 803-898-1470.

**Conway.** Children's Recovery Center, Horry County, Frank Rogers, Director. NCA associate member; full member application pending. 843-248-4838.

**Florence.** Durant Children's Center, Ellen Hamilton, Director. NCA full member. 843-669-4694.

**Greenville.** Upstate Children's Center, Heidi Anderson, Director. NCA associate member. 864-233-2882.

**Greenwood.** Children's Advocacy Program, Martha Busterna, Director. Recently established program. 864-227-1623.

**Lancaster.** Palmetto Citizens Against Sexual Assault, Margaux Dixon, Coordinator. Recently established program. 803-286-5232.

**Lexington.** Lexington County Children's Center, Sheryl Donovan, Director. 803-791-1511.

**Spartanburg.** Children's Advocacy Center of Spartanburg, Dateria Johnson, Director. NCA full member. 864-515-9922.

For more information on the National Children's Alliance, go to [www.nncac.org](http://www.nncac.org) or call 800-239-9950.

### Supreme Court Upholds SVP Law

In the December 2000 issue of this newsletter, we reported on a case before the U.S. Supreme Court involving a Washington law that provided for involuntary civil commitment of sexually violent predators.

In January the Court held that a person committed under Washington's SVP law could not challenge the law on ex post facto or double jeopardy grounds "as applied" to him. The Court stated that once a law is found to be civil, it cannot be deemed punitive as applied to a single individual under those constitutional theories. For the full text of the opinion, *Seling v. Young*, 121 S.Ct. 727 (2001), go to [www.supremecourtus.gov](http://www.supremecourtus.gov).

On April 2, the Supreme Court granted certiorari on an SVP case from Kansas that will re-examine the law upon which South Carolina's SVP statute was based. See *Kansas v. Crane*, 69 U.S.L.W. 3418 (April 2, 2001).

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