

## Child advocacy centers get boost with new board

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PORTSMOUTH — Going back more than 20 years, former Portsmouth Police Chief Brad Russ recognized the need for a neutral, nonthreatening environment to interview possible child abuse victims.

In the late 1980s, he traveled to Huntsville, Ala., where a child advocacy center model had been put into place, and he knew immediately it was something they wanted to do in New Hampshire.

Russ helped found the first child advocacy center in the state in 2000, and in the last five years, six more have been established.

The seven agencies throughout the state are funded almost entirely by grant and donor funds and sustainability is always a concern.

But that may change after Attorney General Kelly Ayotte recently announced the formation of a high-level, statewide board to oversee and support the seven current and two developing child advocacy centers in the state.

Members of the advisory board include several state commissioners, agency heads and directors of nonprofits involved in family violence prevention.

"The CAC project in New Hampshire is probably one of the most exciting projects I've ever been involved with," Sandra Matheson, director of the Attorney General's Office of Victim/Witness Assistance and chair of the Attorney General's Task force on Child Abuse and Neglect, said.

Matheson has worked for the state AG's office for more than 20 years, and she said it has been a long standing goal of the agency to try and standardize the way abuse cases are handled across the state, and to ensure anyone working on these cases is well trained.

"This is an area this attorney general and the attorney general before her have been very committed to," Matheson said.

The AG's task force worked in collaboration with the network of centers to form the advisory board.

Amanda Peterson, director for the New Hampshire Network of Child Advocacy Centers, said one of the roles of the board will be to take the network's strategic plan and look at what they can do as department heads and high level officials to augment the work.

"For instance, they will be looking at sustainability and looking at it from a much bigger place ... they are really in a position to leverage agency support, we can leverage local community support," Peterson said.

Maureen Sullivan, director of the Rockingham County Child Advocacy Center, said the other benefit of the board is gaining name recognition.

"People don't know us until it becomes an issue," Sullivan said. "Kudos to Kelly Ayotte for finding us a place we belong."

Under the former system, children would need to tell their stories multiple times to child protective services, police, prosecutors and others, forcing them to relive the painful things that happened to them over and over again.

In communities with a child advocacy center, law enforcement, the Division for Children, Youth and Families, the County Attorney's Office, victim advocate services, and medical and mental health professionals sign a shared service agreement in which all parties self mandate a team approach to child abuse investigations and subsequent service delivery.

Children meet once in a comfortable space with a specially trained forensic interviewer and the information is passed on to the appropriate agencies.

"I used to work these cases and when you have individuals not cooperating with one another ... the children suffer in those situations," Russ said. "So what the CAC does is it brings everyone together toward common goals and objectives by sharing information and collaborating during these investigations. You, in effect, create a situation that supports effective investigations and prosecution, and that's what you need."

In 2007, New Hampshire Child Advocacy Centers provided services to more than 1,375 children. Ninety percent of these children had a presenting allegation of child sexual abuse, the majority under 10 years of age.

Peterson said the state is lucky to have an attorney general that so wholeheartedly supports child advocacy centers.