

# **SONOMA COUNTY'S REDWOOD CHILDREN'S CENTER: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY INTERVIEW CENTER FOR ASSESSING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE**

**Kelli Kopeck\***

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The investigation of child sexual abuse is a sensitive process that can sometimes lead to further trauma of the child victim. Research indicates that the skill of the interviewer and minimization of number of interviews are the two factors that most effectively reduce trauma and enhance prosecution rates. This data has led the Office of the Attorney General of the State of California to recommend that all counties develop multidisciplinary team centers as the preferred response to child sexual abuse.

Santa Cruz County has an existing Memorandum of Understanding that outlines how child abuse investigations will be conducted. We do not, however, have an existing multidisciplinary team or interview center. Within our efforts to minimize trauma to the child victim and enhance prosecution rates there exists room for improvement.

In an effort to study best practices and make recommendations to improve Santa Cruz County's response to sexual abuse investigations, I traveled to Sonoma County to observe the Redwood Children's Center, a multidisciplinary interview center for assessing incidents of child sexual abuse.

My goal was to understand the center's structure, policies, general-operating procedures, oversight and funding sources. I observed day to day opera-

tions, interviewed staff members, participated in some training, reviewed the center's procedures manual, and attended an Oversight Committee meeting.

### **FINDINGS**

The Redwood Children's Center operates under an inter-departmental agreement between Sonoma County Human Services, the District Attorney's Office, Sonoma County Health Services, and the Sonoma County Law Enforcement Chief's Association. The center provides a safe environment for children to be interviewed using the skills of a multidisciplinary team. The center has developed protocols for the referral of cases to the center, interviewing procedures, medical exam procedures, providing family support and education, and prosecution of child sexual abuse cases. These protocols are based on the National Children's Alliance standards for establishment of a Children's Advocacy Center. The standards include:

- A child appropriate/child friendly facility
- A multidisciplinary team
- Organizational capacity
- Cultural competency and diversity
- Forensic interviews
- Medical evaluation
- Therapeutic intervention
- Victim support and advocacy

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\* Kelli Kopeck M.S. is a Senior Staff Development Trainer for Family and Children's Services of Santa Cruz County.

- Case review
- Case tracking

The Redwood Children's Center serves approximately 400 children a year. Outcome research conducted in the year 2000 indicates that establishment of the center has positively impacted the processing of criminal cases and referral for victims to counseling and treatment in Sonoma County.

The Redwood Children's Center currently faces some challenges in the era of budget reductions. These challenges include maintaining adequate staff and services, helping the community recognize the value of the center, and providing translation services to Spanish-speaking families.

### **IMPLCATIONS FOR SANTA CRUZ COUNTY**

A multidisciplinary child interview center would enhance Santa Cruz County's response to child sexual abuse investigations. It could provide an experienced and skilled set of professionals who are capable of minimizing trauma to child victims and enhancing criminal prosecution. The development of such a center would require the following actions:

- Inter-Department commitment of staff,
- Inter-Department agreement on a set of operational procedures, and
- Initial funding for space, equipment, and training costs.

Most of these startup costs can be funded through grants.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Santa Cruz County Family and Children's Services receives reports of over 400 cases of child sexual abuse each year. Investigation of most of these cases involves collaboration with one of the eight Law Enforcement jurisdictions in our county. All of these Departments share a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which outlines how we will work together to reach a disposition on these cases. The purpose of the MOU is to outline a coordinated system for responding to and investigating allegations of child abuse, to eliminate duplication of effort, and promote proper and expeditious collections and preservation of evidence. The goal of the MOU is to promote collaboration, sharing of information, coordination of investigations and engagement in a shared decision-making process, where appropriate. In addition, use of the MOU is designed to minimize trauma, enhance positive outcomes for child victims, and facilitate apprehension and prosecution of alleged perpetrators of child abuse.

However, sometimes the reality of working relationships varies significantly from written agreements. For example, in a recent Family and Children's Services Case, a report was made alleging that a young girl had been sexually abused by her father. The Family and Children's Services social worker coordinated with the appropriate law enforcement department as per the MOU, and participated in a team response to investigate the allegation. Over a period of six days, the girl was taken into protective

custody, interviewed by a sergeant, returned to her relative's care, then removed and placed into foster care by an on-call social worker and finally interviewed again by another detective five days later. During this period of time she was asked questions such as, "Do you know what sex is?" And "Sometimes, because fathers have hormones and sometimes they have a bad day, they do bad things, the worst things imaginable. I worry that something bad might have happened to you. Do you know what I'm talking about?" This young girl did not disclose sexual abuse. After several days in foster care, and two separate interviews, law enforcement had no prosecutable case and Family and Children's Services had questionable grounds for detention of the young girl.

This case is an example of how the system can sometimes do more harm than good. Because of my concerns about how our county handles sexual abuse investigation, I planned my BASSC exchange project to observe the Redwood Children's Center, a multi-disciplinary facility designed for the handling of alleged child sexual abuse investigations.

### **BACKGROUND**

The incidence of child sexual abuse has risen steadily in the past 20 years. Concern over the growing number of child victims has led to a greater emphasis on criminal prosecution in child sexual abuse cases. However, many therapists who treat child victims have expressed frustration that the legal system's response to child sexual abuse may

be as traumatic for children as the original abuse. Research indicates that multiple interviews by different strangers can be traumatizing to children, and do not lead to a high rate of disclosure by victims. It also indicates that the skill of the interviewer is the single most important factor in determining the outcome of sexual abuse interviews with children.

These findings have led to the development of a multidisciplinary team (MDT) approach to investigating child sexual abuse, which combines the efforts of law enforcement, mental health and public health. The use of multidisciplinary forensic interview centers for the investigation of child sexual abuse has risen dramatically since 1990. In 1994 the Office of the Attorney General of California recommended that all counties in the state develop MDT centers as the preferred response to child sexual abuse. Research and pilot projects validated the use of such centers by demonstrating improved criminal prosecution outcomes and reduction of trauma to children.

### **PROGRAM OPERATION**

The Redwood Children's Center is a multidisciplinary interview center for assessing incidents of child sexual abuse in Sonoma County. It was established in 1994 as a joint effort between Sonoma County Human Services and Health Services Departments, the District Attorneys' Office and the Sonoma County Law Enforcement Chief's Association. The center is located adjacent to the Valley of the Moon Children's Home, in a rural setting outside of Santa Rosa. It provides a quiet and secluded location, well suited for situations where family privacy and confidentiality are desired. The staff consists of the following specialized experts: a Deputy District Attorney, two Forensic Interview Specialists, a Forensic Medical Examiner, a Mental

Health Practitioner, and Clerical Support.

The mission statement of the Redwood Children's Center (RCC) is "providing a child friendly environment in which children and youth can be interviewed, using the skills and knowledge of the multi-disciplinary team, to ascertain the facts and discover the truth concerning suspected child sexual abuse." Referrals to the RCC are made from law enforcement agencies in Sonoma County, for any situation in which there is a reasonable suspicion that child sexual abuse has occurred. The District Attorney's Office has mandated that all cases in Sonoma County that are referred for prosecution must have had an interview at RCC.

When a family arrives at the Redwood Children's Center they are given a tour of the facility to help establish rapport. Each child is interviewed individually by a Forensic Interview Specialist. This person is specially trained to carefully ask questions in language suited to the child's age and level of understanding. The interview is held in a room designed to be child friendly. The furniture and decorations are minimal and child-sized. Art materials and dolls are on hand to assist in the child's description of events. The interview room is equipped with a one-way window, a video camera and microphones. During the interview, a multidisciplinary team that consists of the Deputy District Attorney, a Law Enforcement Officer and Medical Examiner, and a Child Welfare Worker observe and video record the interview. The observation team can communicate with the interviewer through the use of a radio microphone. For those children requiring a sexual assault medical exam, a youth-oriented examination room and highly trained and experienced medical staff are available. The family will also be given a referral for therapy services. In cases where there may be physical evidence of

assault, trained medical staff is available on the premises to conduct a forensic medical exam. While the interview is taking place, a Mental Health Counselor engages the family in a supportive interview and offers referral to counseling and treatment services in the community. Finally, the interview and exam are reviewed in a team meeting, and the evidence that has been gathered becomes part of an ongoing investigation that may lead to prosecution by the District Attorney, or removal of the child from parental custody.

### **MULTIDISCIPLINARY COMMITMENT**

The concept of the Redwood Children's Center was developed in response to a high-profile kidnapping and child assault/homicide in Sonoma County, as well as recommendations by the California Office of the Attorney General. A commitment to the RCC and the multidisciplinary team process was made at the administrative level by all Sonoma County law enforcement agencies, Child Welfare Services, Health Services, the District Attorney's Office, and the County Court.

Before the center was opened, a Protocol Committee established a set of policies and procedures. The committee was made up of detectives from Santa Rosa Police Department, A Sergeant from Sonoma County Sheriff's Office, an Assistant District Attorney and the Deputy Director of Department of Social Services.

Protocols were modeled after the Child Abuse Services Team (CAST) Task Force, which was developed in Orange County in 1987. The protocols outline initial contact with a potential victim, including required information by law enforcement, protective custody, and evidence gathering at initial

contact, risk and medical assessment and referral to the center. Procedures are also established for scheduling of interviews, investigation responsibilities of law enforcement and child welfare, jurisdiction, the forensic interview, areas of responsibility, medical examination procedure, inter-agency conflict/complaint procedure, citizen complaint procedure, and prosecution of minor offenders,

An oversight committee, comprised of department heads from the District Attorney's Office, Law Enforcement Chiefs Association, Department of Human Services, and Department of Health Services, meets every four months to monitor policies and procedures. In addition, a Steering Committee comprised of department designees, meets monthly to implement policy and resolve collaborative barriers.

### **A FINANCIAL COMMITMENT**

Startup costs for the center included an upgrade to an existing building, acquisition of equipment, and salaries for staff. Some of the cost of equipment was covered by grants, and some medical equipment was donated to the center. The largest financial commitment is the ongoing salaries for staff.

Each department has agreed to provide staff to maintain the multidisciplinary team. Department of Social Services provides one full-time Social Worker, one full-time Social Work Supervisor, and one full-time Clerk. Due to recent budget cuts, one full-time Social Worker position was recently eliminated, and the Supervisor has taken on more responsibility to conduct forensic interviews. Department of Health provides one ¾-time Mental Health Worker, and two ½-time Public Health Nurses. The Office of the District Attorney provides one full-time Assistant District Attorney.

## **A COMMITMENT TO TRAINING**

Staff members at the Redwood Children's Center receive ongoing training to keep their skills at their peak. Forensic interviewers maintain membership with the National Children's Alliance, a non-profit organization whose mission is to assist communities seeking to improve their responses to child abuse by establishing and maintaining Children's Advocacy Centers. They also participate in a Consortium of Northern California Forensic Interviewers. The Center Supervisor provides ongoing training to Law Enforcement on the referral process. The center also conducts a monthly case review meeting, in which one or two cases are reviewed to ensure that protocols have been followed properly. The goal of training is to develop knowledge and learn about recent research outcomes related to different models of forensic interviewing, including Spanish language interviewing. Training costs are covered by grants from The National Children's Alliance or by a contract with the California Institute on Human Services, Sonoma State University.

## **SUCCESSSES AND DIFFICULTIES**

The RCC serves approximately 400 children each year. Twenty six percent of the children served are 0-6 years of age, 32 % are 7-12 years, and 40 % are 13-18 years. Thirty-one percent of the children interviewed are Hispanic. Therefore one of the forensic interviewers on staff at the RCC is bilingual in Spanish. The vast majority of children interviewed at RCC are victims of sexual abuse. However, some children interviewed are victims of physical abuse or domestic violence. Twenty-eight percent of the children who are interviewed also receive an onsite medical exam. Over 40 % of the cases investigated at the RCC are accepted for prosecution by the District Attorney's Office.

The effectiveness of the RCC has been evaluated through the use of outcome research in the year 2000. Data surveyed included 400 cases from 1997 to 1998. The data was obtained from intake forms, law enforcement reports, forensic medical examiner reports, interview specialists notes, and Deputy District Attorney evaluations. The study concluded that victim disclosure obtained during interviews at the RCC was significantly related to successful case processing in the criminal justice system. The majority of children interviewed at the RCC made some level of disclosure. Therefore, the RCC has had a positive effect on the processing of criminal cases. Due to difficulty in evaluating reduction of trauma, the study appeared to be less clear in determining the effect of the RCC on the level of trauma of the child victim. Research has indicated, however, that families who are referred to RCC have a higher incidence of referral for counseling and treatment.

The biggest challenge the RCC currently faces is managing the center in times of budget cuts. One position of Forensic Interviewer has already been cut, and the position of Mental Health Worker is on the chopping block. Earlier this year, the District Attorney's Office attempted to move the Assistant District Attorney offsite in order to assign him other cases. After much discussion by the Steering Committee, the position was not altered. A staff retreat is scheduled to identify issues and solutions to the problem of diminishing resources. One goal of the center is to help the community continue to recognize the value of the center.

Another challenge for the RCC is conducting forensic interviews with Spanish-speaking families. While the center has a bilingual Forensic Interviewer, other members of the multidisciplinary team who observe the interview are not bilingual.

The center currently uses a court-certified translator, who sits in the interview room and translates for both the interviewer and the child victim. The center is exploring the possibility and legal ramifications of placing the translator in the observation room.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR SANTA CRUZ**

Before evaluating implications of the establishment of a multidisciplinary center in Santa Cruz County, it is useful to consider current practices in our county, which are based on similar values and objectives. Current practice for the investigation of child sexual abuse at Family and Children's Services involves the use of a rotation schedule to assign an investigative Social Worker. Among our staff there exists a wide variety of experience, training, skill and comfort level with sexual content. Most commonly, children are interviewed by a Social Worker and if the child makes a disclosure law enforcement is contacted for a cross report. As in the example cited above, multiple follow-up interviews might then take place.

Santa Cruz shares the goals of increasing investigative effectiveness and reduction of trauma to the child victim. Therefore, best practice dictates that once an initial disclosure is made, an MDT should be convened to conduct one in-depth interview to gather evidence for any criminal prosecution and assess the need for dependency action to protect the child. In addition, the interview may provide a preliminary psychosocial evaluation of the child to determine specific needs for services.

The County of Santa Cruz implemented a multidisciplinary team for child sexual abuse investigation in 1995-96, with an interview center set up at Cabrillo College. Members of the team included

detectives from law enforcement departments in Santa Cruz County, a child protective services worker, and an Assistant District Attorney. All members of the team received specialized forensic interview training. The interview center was set up with a two-way mirror and video recording equipment. Unfortunately, the center was too small to be practical, and the equipment did not meet the needs of the team. The center was never used to interview victims. Due to high staff turnover in several offices, the MDT was eventually disbanded.

Given that research indicates that the use of child sexual abuse MDT's do increase the effectiveness of prosecution and reduce trauma to the victim, it seems appropriate for Santa Cruz to revisit the development of a MDT for sexual abuse investigations. In order to be effective, the team would need proper equipment and a commitment at an administrative level among all departments involved. If the resources do not exist for an interview center, it would still be worthwhile to create a multidisciplinary team of specialized experts who could conduct a single forensic interview to gather evidence, evaluate safety for the child and provide ongoing case tracking. This team could consist of a Social Worker from Family and Children's Services, a Detective from the appropriate law enforcement department, an Assistant District Attorney, and a SART nurse. It would be especially useful to conduct MDT case reviews on a regular basis to evaluate whether proper protocols are being implemented.

Several of the local law enforcement offices, as well as the District Attorney's Office, have rooms set up for interviewing. Some of these offices already possess recording equipment. Therefore, it does not appear that cost of allocation of necessary equipment and creation of a child-friendly interview

room would be prohibitive. The largest challenge would be getting administrative agreement and commitment to form and utilize such a team, establish a consistent set of protocols, and in getting team members trained. Training grants are available through the National Children's Alliance. Child Abuse Training and Technical Assistance (CATT), from Sonoma State University, also has resources to provide consultation and training in the development of a multidisciplinary team.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

My tour of the Redwood Children's Center was a great opportunity to view best practices in child sexual abuse investigations. It was inspiring to see the commitment made by such a diverse group of departments for the protection of children. I was impressed with the professionalism of the staff at the center. I would like to personally thank Suni Levi, Kerri Locklear, and Mary Ann Swanson for their generosity of time and hospitality.

#### **REFERENCES**

- Memorandum of Understanding between County of Santa Cruz Human Resources Agency Family and Children's Services & California State Parks Santa Cruz District, Capitola Police Department, County of Santa Cruz Office of the District Attorney, Santa Cruz County Sheriff, Santa Cruz Police Department, Scotts Valley Police Department, University of California at Santa Cruz Police Department, Watsonville Police Department
- An Evaluation of a Multidisciplinary Interview Center: Measuring Court Outcomes and Service Referrals, Alfredo de Hoyos Perez.
- Child Abuse Services Team: Reducing the Trauma for a Victim.
- Redwood Children's Center Procedures Manual.