



United Way
of Bradley County

United Way grant helps develop local Children's Advocacy Center

(Eighth in a series detailing the 14 programs receiving United Way of Bradley County grants made possible through the Bradley Memorial Health Endowment Fund)

For many years, when an allegation of sexual abuse of a child was reported, that child and his or her family had to go to Athens for a proper interview that becomes part of a law enforcement investigation. It was not only a financial burden on the families, but also many times an emotional burden.

Through a grant from United Way of Bradley County, as part of the Bradley Memorial Health Endowment Fund, these interviews can be conducted in Cleveland at the Tenth Judicial District Children's Advocacy Center.



The center, located in the Monument Building on Ocoee Street, opened on March 1.

"The Children's Advocacy Center is a site where we provide special services to children," explained Executive Director Teresa Grant. "We see children when there is an allegation of sexual abuse. We receive our referrals from the Department of Children's Services, law enforcement or the District Attorney's office."

Grant said that in Athens, the CAC is combined with the HOPE Center, which is a site that deals with adult victims of domestic violence. In Bradley County, the Family Resource Agency has a program that deals with that issue, as well as a safe house for victims called the Harbor Safe House.

Since opening at the beginning of March, the local Children's Advocacy Center has interviewed 11 children who were allegedly victims of sexual abuse. Three of those children also received medical exams at the center.

"We opened on March 1, and we had four (alleged victims) that first day," she said. "The 11 who have been interviewed were in the span of seven working days here in Bradley County."

At the present time, staff from the Children's Advocacy Center in Athens is shared with Bradley County, which accounts for the seven days of service locally. The McMinn County staff also works with children from the two other counties in the judicial district – Polk County and Monroe County.

"We conduct completely neutral interviews with these children, asking no leading questions, but just trying to get the child to tell what has occurred," Grant said. She said that the CAC has two very qualified interviewers – Tammy Walker and Lindsey Howard – one of whom interviews a victim when an adult is the alleged offender, the other when a child is the alleged offender.

These interviews are videoed, and are monitored in a separate room by members of the Child Protective Investigative Team (CPIT), which includes law enforcement, Department of Children's Services and the District Attorney's office.

Grant said it is only the child and the CAC interviewer in the room when that interview is taking place.

"We want that child to feel as comfortable as possible, so there are no toys in there, or paintings on the wall, or anything like that. It is very intentional that it be a neutral setting, so there will be nothing to over-stimulate the child and so the focus of the child will be on the interviewer," she explained.

Grant said that along with the interviewers, the CAC also has a sexual assault nurse examiner who works with the program, as well as a family advocate.

“Our family advocate will do an assessment with the family because, in many cases, it might be that the alleged perpetrator is in the home and it could be the person who was the source of income for that family,” she said. “Now that that person is not allowed in the home, the family needs specific help, which the advocate helps them locate. The family advocate also will be the one to follow them through the court process.”

Children who come to the CAC range in age normally from about 3 years old to 18. Grant said that the child must be at an age to be able to verbally talk to the interviewer, so 3-years-old is about the youngest they interview.

She said that law enforcement and the District Attorney’s office, along with the DCS, are all very pleased that there is a Children’s Advocacy Center in Bradley County. Grant credits the United Way funds for making it possible, and said that it is quite a coincidence that the center originated in Athens 16 years ago through a partnership with United Way of McMinn and Meigs Counties.

“If we had not been able to get the grant from United Way of Bradley County, we could not have opened our doors here,” Grant said. “Many people have been pushing for this to happen, but without the United Way dollars, it would not have occurred.”

Matt Ryerson, United Way of Bradley County Vice President of Community Investment Strategies, said that it is unfortunate that there are children in these situations and need this type of help, but he is glad that the hospital endowment fund is able to help provide for this facility.

“We believe the service provided by this center is exactly the type of program that the Board of Trustees of the hospital had in mind when they tasked us with funding programs that serve the health, wellness and quality of life of Bradley County residents,” Ryerson said. “As long as abuse of children is occurring, we will desperately need these programs to serve these young victims.

“We are honored to be a part of a team that helps those who cannot help themselves,” he added.

Grant said that there will be an official grand opening on April 12 at the Children's Advocacy Center, with Tennessee's first lady, Andrea Conte, being the special guest. Ms. Conte, wife of Gov. Phil Bredesen, is a supporter of these types of centers all across the state.

She also added that if a child reports an allegation of sexual abuse, you should contact local law enforcement, who will in turn contact the CAC staff. Grant said that the initial contact needs to be with law enforcement.

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COMFORT BEARS – Local Children's Advocacy Center Executive Director Teresa Grant sits with several donated teddy bears used to help ease the trauma for children who have been victims of alleged sexual abuse. The bears are given to the children following interviews with CAC staff, and "many times these children will show up in court holding that same bear for comfort."