

Napa Valley *Register*

Decade-old center for abused Napa County kids looks to serve more traumatized youth

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The downtown Napa Courage Center has been a one-stop shop for interviews and exams of more than 700 children, most of whom were victims of sexual abuse, since it opened a decade ago.

Now, center leaders are looking to expand the program and serve more child victims who experience physical abuse, witness domestic violence or live in homes where drug use is rampant with a \$200,000 grant from the state Office of Emergency Services. That office also allowed the Center to hire its first full-time employee, director Sharon DeMarco, last summer.

The Courage Center is marked by a decal of a bright yellow cartoon lion and sits in the back of the red brick Aldea building, across the street from the downtown Napa Police station. Inside, it's filled with colorful furniture, a life-sized teddy bear, posters, murals of rolling hills, and donated stuffed animals that kids can hold during their visit and bring home afterward. There are tissues, potato chips and Red Vines for when the going gets tough.

Parents don't have to worry about taking their kids to a police station, where they're interviewed in the same place as crime suspects, said Paul Gero, assistant Napa County District Attorney. "There's actually a place where children can be interviewed, where they can be comfortable, and there's toys around and they're safe," said Gero, who began pushing for such a center in 2006.

The program previously operated on an as-needed basis, without anyone working inside during normal business hours. Nurses, law enforcement officers, child welfare workers, bilingual child advocates and others converge at the center. The child can be connected with an advocate or mental health services on the spot.

"Everything can happen then and there, with the thought being that it would really decrease the additional trauma that this kind of process inflicts on a child," said Agnes Dziadur, who prosecutes child sex abuse cases for the Napa County D.A.'s Office.

Last year, 75 kids from across the valley were interviewed in the Courage Center. Only a handful of those cases may have been prosecuted because the D.A. needs to have enough evidence to prove their case beyond a reasonable doubt, but the center still connects kids with services they may need, Dziadur said.

Almost all child abuse victims pass through the Courage Center doors, she said. Sometimes, interviews are performed on behalf of other state or out-of-state agencies, if local kids are involved in a case elsewhere.

Interviews with kids are conducted in a seating area that much resembles a living room. There's a wood armoire, a kid-sized armchair, and the interview is taped by an inconspicuous camera. Dziadur can observe the meeting through a two-way glass mirror and feed the interviewer

questions through an earpiece without interrupting the interview or requiring the child to sit through a second interview.

Center leaders are trying to educate the community on what the Courage Center can offer, now that it has the resources to serve more kids.

DeMarco hopes to program materials to schools, playing an explanatory video and reminding teachers of their responsibilities as mandated reporters. She wants people to know that the center is a place where children and family can learn about the process.

"I can see when the families are in here ... they're distressed and they don't know what's going on," DeMarco said. "The team is fabulous at comforting and guiding them through the process."

DeMarco also seeks to ensure staff members get the help they need to cope with secondary trauma after working with abused kids, and prevent abuse from happening in the first place. Next month she plans to hold a workshop for parents to teach them how to work through confrontations with their kids without hurting their child.

The Courage Center is a big improvement from the interview room that prosecutors used more than a decade ago, officials said. They would meet kids in a room in a portable Child Protective Services building.

Children got too distracted there, the officials said.

They could hear everything said outside of the room and vice versa. Kids would look through the two-way mirror and wave at Gero or play with the microphone, and prosecutors would talk with parents in the hallway. The process was riddled with tension and anxiety, he said.

"It's extremely quiet, it's extremely private ... there's a private entrance," Gero said. "It's just night and day."

To learn more about the Courage Center, contact DeMarco at SDeMarco@aldeainc.org or 707-225-3802.