



CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Bivona Child Advocacy Center helps children heal after abuse

By Jane Sutter

When a child is a victim of sexual or physical abuse, having to re-tell to multiple adults what happened may just exacerbate the trauma.

The goal of Bivona Child Advocacy Center is to reduce the trauma that victims experience and provide services to the child and family by coordinating activities of various agencies.

The Child Advocacy Model was developed long before the establishment of Bivona in 2004, explained Bivona Executive Director Deb Rosen, but it's novel due to its collaborative approach. "Rather than having each discipline that responds to child abuse respond on its own, to their own protocol, we come together, and we coordinate our activities so that the children and family really only need to come to one place."

That one place is the Bivona Child Advocacy Center, located in a specially renovated stone warehouse (named for lead benefactors the Skalny family) at One Mount Hope Boulevard.

Bivona Child Advocacy Center is named after Kathie and Lou Bivona, founders of the New York Chapter of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in 1982, who were a part of developing what is today Bivona Child Advocacy Center.

While Bivona works primarily in Monroe County, there are about 40 Child Advocacy Centers around New York State, and several within the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester.

Partnering with agencies to protect children

Bivona acts as the backbone of a 22-agency



Deb Rosen, Bivona Executive Director.

partnership of multiple disciplines who work together to respond to and prevent child abuse, Rosen said. Those partners include Monroe County Child Protective Services (CPS), local law enforcement, the district attorney's office, Catholic Family Center, REACH (Referral and Evaluation service for Abused Children) of Golisano Children's Hospital, RESTORE sexual assault services, Linden Oaks Specialized Assessment and Treatment Services, and others.

Bivona gets involved when a report of a concern of child abuse is made to CPS or to law enforcement or signs of potential abuse are discovered through a medical appointment. Either CPS or law enforcement takes the lead on investigating the case, but Bivona coordinates with them and other partners, taking that burden off the families of victims. "That is very unusual in the field of child welfare, in the field of victim services, and that is really what makes the Child Advocacy Center so special," Rosen stated.

When a case is referred to Bivona, the child victim comes to Bivona for a forensic interview, which is a highly structured interview that's appropriate for the child's



At Bivona Child Advocacy Center, children are interviewed in a special room designed to be child-friendly with child-size furniture, attractive paint colors and upholstery, and drawing materials and toys that kids may use to tell their stories.

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developmental level. A forensic investigator, either employed by Bivona or CPS, conducts the interview, which is recorded and observed by other professionals involved in the investigation. Children only need to tell their story of trauma one time and the recording is shared as appropriate.

The observers are behind one-way mirrors or watch through TV monitors, and the children are made aware of that, Rosen explained. The interview rooms are kid-friendly, with child-size furniture, attractive paint colors and upholstery, and drawing materials and toys that kids may use to tell their stories. About 43 percent of children interviewed are under age 7, and a significant number of those are under age 3.

Although children are alone during the interview, a caregiver (most likely a parent but not the accused offender) is present during the medical evaluation. Kids and their families meet with a family advocate who will determine services needed, such as mental health counseling. All of this takes place at Bivona.

While Rosen said Bivona doesn't have good data on how many cases are prosecuted, it's a "very small percentage," but those that are prosecuted tend to be highly successful. She attributes that in part to the coordination of services and the "highly impactful" information collected in the forensic interview.

About 65 percent of the cases Bivona sees are sexual abuse, with the rest being serious physical abuse that leaves significant injury, Rosen said. The agency provided services for roughly 2,000 children last year. Bivona has 19 employees, and the partnership agencies have about 80 people in the Skalny building.

While Bivona continues to see more children each year, Rosen credits that to Bivona's efforts at community outreach, resulting in law enforcement more routinely bringing their investigations to Bivona. Rosen doesn't believe that the number of incidents of abuse is growing locally but that it's relatively stable.

"We work very hard" on community outreach

A significant part of Bivona's mission is community outreach. "We work very hard to keep local schools knowledgeable about and aware of their requirements as mandated reporters to report suspicions for abuse," Rosen said. That work includes letting school staff know they can call Bivona for guidance.

A motivating factor behind outreach efforts is the fact that national statistics show

Warning Signs

Have you noticed this type of behavior by the child?

- Difficulty sleeping
- Problems at school or with peers
- Sudden changes in behavior
- Returning to bedwetting, thumb sucking, etc.
- Fear of a certain person
- Skipping school, running away or acting out
- Attempting suicide
- Writing or artwork that's strangely sexual
- Excessive sexual curiosity, masturbation or promiscuity
- Seductive behavior toward adults or peers

Have you noticed these physical signs on the child?

- Unexplained headaches, stomach aches, vomiting, fainting or blackouts
- Bedwetting or soiling
- Loss or gain of appetite and/or weight
- Injury, itching, pain or soreness in genital or anal area
- Torn, stained or bloody underclothes

- Sexually transmitted disease or vaginal discharge
- Pregnancy

Have you seen this behavior in adults near the child?

- Refusal to let child set limits
- Insisting on hugs, touching, kissing, tickling, etc. even when child resists
- Overly interested in child's physical or sexual development
- Insisting on uninterrupted time alone with child
- Spending most of spare time with children rather than peers
- Buying children expensive items or gives money for no reason
- Frequently walking in on child in the bathroom
- Allowing child to get away with inappropriate behavior

To report abuse:

Call the NYS Child Abuse Hotline at **1-800-342-3720**. An operator will help you and if appropriate, register the call in the State Central Register. This prompts an official investigation by local Child Protective Services.

Source: Bivona Child Advocacy Center

that for every one child who discloses abuse, another nine do not. "We want to encourage children to identify a safe adult that they can disclose to and we want to help the adult to be that safe person, and that doesn't come naturally to most adults," Rosen said.

A key program that Bivona offers is Darkness to Light (D2L) Stewards of Children, a two-hour workshop to teach adults how to spot the signs and symptoms of child sexual abuse and how to act responsibly when they think a child is being abused, according to Molly Snell-Larch, community educator at Bivona. "It really takes you from knowing basically nothing about the topic all the way to being able to responsibly handle a potential disclosure from a child."

Bivona is getting ready to launch a new grant-funded program for children in grades K-8. It's called "Child Safety Matters," and its goal is to educate children about personal safety. Bivona will roll out the program in the Pittsford and Spencerport school districts in the fall 2018.

Bivona also offers training to professionals through its annual Child Abuse Summit. The 10th annual event is April 26-27. More

information is available on Bivona's website. Bivona's funding as a 501(C)(3) non-profit comes from philanthropic fundraising (60 percent) and government and contracts (40 percent).

As Bivona continues to grow its outreach, Snell believes the subject of sexual abuse is "being dragged into the light," due to the #metoo movement and news reports of the sexual abuse of female Olympic gymnasts. "We're also as adults becoming more aware how childhood trauma can manifest later in life, both mental health but also physical health outcomes," Snell noted.

Jane Sutter is a Rochester-based freelance writer.



Myths About Sexual Abuse of Children

Article courtesy of Bivona Child Advocacy Center

A medical evaluation will prove if a child has been sexually abused.

False: The vast majority of child victims of sexual abuse do not have medical findings that substantiate sexual abuse. Abnormal genital findings are rare, even in cases where abuse has been factually proven by other forms of evidence. Many acts leave no physical trace. Injuries resulting from sexual abuse tend to heal quickly, and in most instances, exams of child victims do not take place on the same day as the alleged act of abuse due to delayed disclosures.

Children make these types of things up for attention.

False: Children very rarely make false accusations about being sexually abused. Most victims are very reluctant to disclose abuse; they feel shame, and blame themselves for the abuse often as the offender is someone they care about. It is estimated that only 4-8% of child sexual abuse reports are fabricated.

When children disclose abuse, it is important for them to know that they are believed. It is also important that alleged abuse be brought to the attention of health-care, social service, and/or law enforcement professionals.

Only girls are abused.

False: Boys may be victims of abuse. 1 in 10 children will suffer some form of sexual abuse before their 18th birthday. Often the sexual abuse of male victims is underreported due to social and cultural attitudes: boys are taught to not let others see vulnerability. Boys are aware at an early age of the social stigma attached to sexual assault and fear appearing weak to others. All of these attitudes make male child victims far less likely to tell of their abuse.



Children will tell someone if they have been abused.

False: Children are often afraid or ashamed to tell someone about their abuse. Many children are threatened not to tell. 1 in 10 children will be sexually abused by the age of 18. Only 10% of those children will ever disclose the abuse as a child because 90% of abusers are someone the child knows, loves and trusts.

Child sexual abuse is a cultural or socioeconomic problem.

False: Child sexual abuse does not discriminate and crosses all socioeconomic, ethnic and religious barriers. The issue does not discriminate and occurs in large and small families; in cities and in rural areas; in wealthy and lower income neigh-

borhoods; and in homes, schools, churches, and businesses.

Sexual victimization as a child will result in that child becoming an offender.

False: Childhood sexual victimization does not automatically result in a child becoming an offender. This myth often creates a terrible stigma for a child who has been sexually abused. Most children that were sexually victimized never perpetrate against others. Multiple factors contribute to the development of sexually offensive behaviors. Research shows that if a child discloses an incident of sexual abuse and is believed and supported, they have a much higher likelihood of not becoming perpetrators as adults.

All sexual offenders are men.

False: There is no foolproof way to tell if a person would abuse a child. People of all incomes, education levels and professions have been convicted of child sexual and physical abuse. A common assumption is that a person who looks normal and acts normal simply cannot be an offender. Male perpetrators tend to be the majority of reported cases of abuse but women are also capable of being perpetrators. Reports of female perpetrators are on the rise. Research shows that women are perpetrators in 10-20% of child abuse cases and have been reported in cases involving both male and female children.

Talking to children about sexual abuse will simply frighten them.

False: It is important for children to develop basic safety skills in a way that is helpful rather than frightening. Children should learn the proper names for their body parts, including their genitals. Children should know they have permission to refuse unwanted touching from adults and other children.

DARKNESS TO LIGHT STEWARDS OF CHILDREN WORKSHOPS

If your parish, school, agency or church group is interested in hosting this workshop, call Molly Snell-Larch, community educator at Bivona, (585) 935-7800. The training is free.



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DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER

Creating a Safe Environment Newsletter

is published quarterly by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester with the aim of helping all of us keep children and vulnerable adults safe at home, at church and in all places in our community.

Comments can be directed to:
Karen Rinefierd,
Diocesan Coordinator
of Safe Environment Education
and Compliance,
585-328-3228, ext. 1255
or Karen.Rinefierd@dor.org.

Victims of sexual abuse by any employee of the Church should always report to the civil authorities.

To report a case of possible sexual abuse and to receive help and guidance from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester, contact the diocesan Victim Assistance Coordinator:

Deborah Housel
(585) 328-3228, ext. 1555;
toll-free 1-800-388-7177,
ext. 1555
victimsassistance@dor.org.

All photos in this newsletter are for illustrative purposes only.

ADDITIONAL SAFETY RESOURCES

ONLINE SAFETY RESOURCES

CHILDREN & TEENS' SAFETY SITES:

Webonauts Internet Academy:

<http://pbskids.org/webonauts/>
PBS Kids game that helps younger children understand the basics of Internet behavior and safety.

NSTeens:

<http://www.nsteens.org/>
A program of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children that has interactive games and videos on a variety of Internet safety topics.

FOR PARENTS:

Common Sense Media

<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/parent-concerns>
A comprehensive and frequently updated site that is packed with resources. Dedicated to improving the lives of kids and families by providing information and education

Family Online Safety Institute:

<http://www.fosi.org/>

iKeepSafe:

<http://www.ikeepsafe.org/>
Resources for parents, educators, kids and parishes on navigating mobile and social media technologies

Faith and Safety:

<http://www.faithandsafety.org>
Safety in a digital world, a joint project of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Greek Orthodox Church in America

LOCAL RESOURCES AND CONTACT INFORMATION

Bivona Child Advocacy Center
(Monroe, Wayne counties):
www.BivonaCAC.org
585-935-7800

Chemung County Child Advocacy Center:
607-737-8449
www.chemungcounty.com

Child Advocacy Center of Cayuga County:
315-253-9795
www.cacofcayugacounty.org

Finger Lakes Child Advocacy Program
(Ontario County):
www.cacfingerlakes.org
315-548-3232

Darkness to Light organization:
www.d2l.org

STEBEN COUNTY: Southern Tier Children's Advocacy Center:
www.sthcs.org
716-372-8532

NYS State Central Registry
(Child Abuse Reporting Hotline):
1-800-342-3720

NYS Child Advocacy Resource and Consultation Center (CARCC)
866-313-3013

Tompkins County Advocacy Center:
www.theadvocacycenter.org
607-277-3203

Wyoming County Sexual Abuse Response Team:
585-786-8846

Yates County Child Abuse Review Team:
315-531-3417, Ext. 6