

Center's new office home to state's oldest sex abuse response team

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STAMFORD — There is a very small, very plain room in the Child Guidance Center of Southern Connecticut's new Stamford office. The bare walls are white, two chairs face each other and a large writing tablet sits on an easel at one end of the room. At the other end, above the bucket of brightly colored plastic pinwheels which provides the room's only decoration, a small video camera is mounted on the wall.

Any child suspected of having been sexually molested in lower Fairfield County is interviewed in this room.

"We used to have one-way mirrors," said Sherry Perlstein, executive director of the Child Guidance Center. "The children actually found that very distracting."

On the other side of the wall, there is a closed-circuit television and a conference table. When an interview is conducted, the head of the Child Guidance Center's Child Sexual Abuse Response Team [SART], as well as representatives from the police department and the Department of Children and Families observe the proceedings, sometimes directing the interviewer to ask specific questions of the child. While the team watches the interview, a counselor from the Sexual Assault Crisis and Education Center is interviewing a non-offending parent in a nearby conference room.

"We need to know if the mother of the child is going to protect the child from further abuse," Perlstein explained.

In 2006, the agency handled 102 such cases, including not only the initial interview and subsequent arrests, but months or years of therapy and other services for the victim and family members.

The child sexual abuse response team, a collaboration between law enforcement, government child protection agencies, social services groups, prosecutors and the Stamford Hospital, is the oldest such program in the state. Ken Mysogland, area director for the Stamford Norwalk DCF region, says that the Child Guidance Center's team acted as the model for every other SART in the state.

"What this team allows to have happened is for the child victim interviewed once," he said. "It is conducted by a trained interviewer, it is video or audiotaped, it is observed by the police and by members of the department."

It is important, said Mysogland, that a child's disclosure of sexual abuse happens only once — multiple interviews, which force children to relive the experience are traumatic— but it is also important that the interview is able to stand up in court. The Child Guidance Center employs a total of six child psychologists who are forensically trained interviewers, said Perlstein. Mysogland says that agencies like the Child Guidance Center make perfect partners in this kind of work for several reasons.

"They are the neutral party," he said. "They are the experts and have the most clinical experience and most understanding of how to interview children."

The SART is one of the two programs housed at the Child Guidance Center of Southern Connecticut's new headquarters, at 196 Greyrock Place in downtown Stamford. It is also home to the agency's emergency mobile crisis services, a 24 hours a day, 7 days a week service which responds to any child who is having a mental health crisis in the region, and to the Child Guidance Center's leadership and administration.

The \$700,000 new office opened on Thursday, June 7. The Child Guidance Center last year purchased 300-year lease rights to the site for \$1.5 million. It will not replace the old West Broad Street headquarters, which remains the base for many of the agency's counseling services, said Perlstein.

The new office represents a major expansion for the 53-year-old agency, which has also has offices in Darien and Greenwich. Because roughly 75 percent of the Child Guidance Center's patients are from Stamford, it makes sense to have two offices in Stamford.

The Child Guidance Center provides several mental health services to children, aged birth to 18, in Stamford, Greenwich, Darien and New Canaan. In 2006, the group served 2,315 patients; 15 percent of whom were preschool age. Many of the patients' families are unable to afford regular mental health care providers. Care, said Perlstein, is offered to these patients on a sliding scale.

"An unusually large percentage of the kids we see — about 20 percent — have no insurance," she said. "Often it's because their parents have an uneven income throughout the year; they are landscapers, or domestics, and they don't make as much in the winter."

Fees for service comprised 16 percent of the Child Guidance Center's revenues in 2006. In order to keep the agency going, both fundraising and grant-writing is necessary, said Perlstein. According to the organization's annual report, the Child Guidance Center had operating expense of \$3.8 million last year. The group raised \$529,021 in contributions from individuals and special events last year and received \$2.1 million in both government and non-government grants.

The building of Stamford's second office, she said was a big decision — the Child Guidance Center had no debt before the project — but Perlstein is pleased to have an office in the heart of Stamford.

"Being downtown, we feel more accessible," she said.