

Testimony on House Bill 1739
Seán M. McCormack, Chief Deputy District Attorney

Thank you for giving me an opportunity to testify on behalf of House Bill 1739. I have specialized in the prosecution of child abuse crimes continuously since 1995. Over the years I have been in the distinct position to see the evolution of the multi-disciplinary team (MDT) process and the formation of Child Advocacy Centers (CACs). Over that time, I have been involved with the investigation of thousands of child abuse allegations. I have agonized over the downfalls of disjointed and uncoordinated investigations and have witnessed the successes that come from coordinated and thorough investigations. I can tell you from firsthand knowledge; Child Advocacy Centers are instrumental in fostering the cooperation between the various disciplines and agencies that make up a multi-disciplinary team.

Child Advocacy Centers, like the Children's Resource Center here in Harrisburg, offer victims and their families a place where they can get what I like to call "one-stop shopping." What I mean by that is, at our Children's Resource Center a child will be interviewed by a specially trained child interview specialist, the interview will be video recorded and the MDT team members can observe the interview live from the observation room. By videotaping the interview, the child is spared having to endure multiple interviews conducted by each investigative agency separately. This reduces the number of interviews because if someone missed the interview they can view the video instead of having to re-interview the child.

After the child's interview, while the child is given a specialized medical exam, the team members will compare notes, plan investigative strategy and decide the investigation's next steps. In sexual assault cases, the victim's medical exam is conducted utilizing special equipment that is able to magnify, photograph and document any injuries discovered during the exam. The interview and the medical exam are all done in a child friendly environment.

As the investigation progresses, the team members meet to review the open investigation at meets known as 'case review'. At the case review meeting, the investigation is put through a process that I call being 'staffed'. At our case review meeting our larger team convenes (known in Dauphin County as the Child Abuse Task Force) to discuss the open investigations. Here the prosecutors, police officers, children and youth case workers, child interview specialists, victim advocates and medical staff have an opportunity to discuss each case. Further investigative strategies are devised and charging decisions are made at this meeting. All of this occurs under the umbrella of the Children's Resource Center. Our Child Advocacy Center has become the focal point of all child abuse investigations in Dauphin County.

We are lucky in Dauphin County to have the strong support of PinnacleHealth. Without their financial support the Children's Resource Center would not exist. But that doesn't mean that our center is financially secure and immune to the sharp edge of a knife cutting a budget in our tight economy. Over the years, I have met with the leadership of PinnacleHealth during times when we were concerned whether or not the CAC's doors would remain open or would be funded at the same level of services that they currently provide. Across this state, many of the CACs are scratching out an existence. Fund raising is a major necessity for CAC executive directors. There are even more communities that need the services that a CAC can provide but they face a major hurdle before those centers can be formed-money.

Support of established CACs and for the emergence of new CACs in communities that are currently not served by a CAC is vital. By supporting CACs in our communities we are going a long way towards ensuring that every abuse child in the Commonwealth is assured a well-coordinated and thorough investigation is conducted on their behalf.

Thank you.