

# ...it's a place to begin healing

By Pat Murphy  
Staff writer

When it opens next Monday, CARE House will try to provide the abused victim with a friendly, familiar atmosphere.

"It will put the youngsters on their own turf," explained assistant prosecutor Joyce Todd, who has been with the Oakland County Prosecutor's office for 10 years and is the office specialist on child sexual assault. She will also head the new unit if it is approved, supervising some cases while prosecuting others.

She is also a staunch supporter of CARE House as a first step toward minimizing the trauma sexually abused youngsters experience.

"It's patterned after other successful child advocacy centers in Madison County, Ala., and DuPage County, Ill.," she said. "It's the first place a young victim is taken" and is designed to be more friendly than the principal's office or the police station.

To reduce the number of times the victim must tell what happened — and thus vicariously relive the incident — he or she will relate the assault as few times as possible. On the social worker, police officer and other necessary personnel present.

"YOUNG VICTIMS will often tell the full story in stages," Todd said. So there's a need for the victim to tell the story more than once or twice.

But, Todd said she has seen victims get tired of reliving the assault — and simply refuse to tell their story one more time.

"The important thing is to build rapport with the victim," Todd explained, "to build confidence and trust."

Assistant prosecutors will build trust too, Todd said, by spending time with the child and his or her family.

As someone who will accompany the child through all stages of the legal process — arraignment, preliminary examination, hearings and the eventual trial, the assistant prosecutor is the one to logically make sure the victim gets familiar with the legal system and the people involved, Todd said.

The youngster should get to know the players involved, she said, the judge, the prosecutor, the defense attorney and, if necessary, the jury — and the role each plays.

"Hopefully the victim won't be as frightened and the trial won't involve more trauma," Todd said.

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The unit calls for six people — four assistant prosecutors and two social workers, known as child victim advocates — to specialize on sexual assault cases.

Instead of the usual workload of nearly 500 cases, those assigned to the unit would have a maximum of 50 cases, Thompson said. The reduced workload will enable them to spend more time on the case and take the extra measures needed to help the child and enhance the chances of prosecution.

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Some social workers, however, say the higher numbers may be more a reflection of better reporting methods, rather than increased numbers of sexual assault cases.

Whatever the dimensions, however, social workers, police and the prosecutor agree the problem of sexually abused children is a serious problem here and elsewhere.

Thus the need for CARE House — as dramatically illustrated in the "Muffin man" television movie.

IN ONE SCENE, for example, the sexually abused youngster, about 4, ran from the courtroom as the imposing looking judge started to bang the gavel.

The scene accurately depicted the fear sexually abused youngsters have, said Cassano, who has a masters degree in social work from the University of Michigan.

"He (the young victim) might have thought the judge was going to punish him," she said. "Children often think they are somehow to blame."

Some of that fear is implanted by the person — relative, acquaintance or stranger — to help intimidate the young victim so they won't tell, or be poor prosecution witnesses if they do.

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The U.S. Department of Justice reports that 90 percent of all child abuse cases are not prosecuted, according to Thompson. The major cause is the child's refusal to testify in court said.

When young victims do testify, the prosecutor said, the defense attorney's primary trial tactic is the destruction of the child as a witness.

In most cases, the defense cross-examination is not utilized to get at the truth, but to confuse, intimidate and frustrate the child," Thompson said.

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## Atlanta mayor speaks here

Andrew Young, mayor of Atlanta, will speak at 2:30 p.m. Wednesday, Nov. 1, at Oakland University on the Future of the Cities: Economically, Politically and Socially.

His speech, which is open to the public, will be held in the Crocker of the Oakland Center on the OU campus.

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