

CARE House reduces trauma, gets convictions

Many child victims of sexual abuse often faced another round of punishment when they entered the criminal justice system by having to undergo a traumatic series of interviews and interrogations.

But then came CARE House, opened two years ago by the Child Abuse and Neglect Council.

A collaborative effort among the Prosecutor's Office, the police departments, the Department of Social Services, and other human service agencies, CARE (Child Abuse Resource Effort) House provides a friendly environment for children where all the agencies coordinate efforts to reduce the number of interview and trauma a young victim endures.

"The program was designed to reduce the added trauma child abuse victims go through and increase the rate of successful prosecutions for such crimes," said Meg Mittel, executive director of the Child Abuse and Neglect Council.

In its first two years, CARE House in Oakland County has done exactly that, she said.

From its opening in November 1989 through October 1991, CARE House has handled 422 cases involving victims ranging from 2-17 years old. Almost 50 percent of the substantiated cases that go through the program are prosecuted.

THIS IS ALMOST double the findings of a 1985 study by the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, in which 21.5 percent of child abuse cases resulted in court action. Furthermore, 86 percent of the CARE

House cases that are prosecuted produce convictions or guilty pleas.

Many factors have contributed to these results, including the Prosecutor's Office's formation of a special Child Sexual Assault Unit, Mittel said. One of CARE House's roles has been to help coordinate the efforts among the many agencies.

"CARE House has been a tremendous help," said Jean Gibson, coordinator for the Child Sexual Assault Unit. "Before the program existed, we would have to interview victims at the police station or in our offices. The children were very uncomfortable in that setting, especially the 3 and 4-year-olds. We couldn't get the information we needed to take their cases to court. With CARE House, they are much more comfortable talking about their experiences. We now have an increased ability to get more cases to court."

To provide a comfortable environment for the children, the interview rooms are set up with furniture, toys and surroundings appropriate for three different age groups: 7 and younger, 8-12, and 13-17. The rooms also have anatomically correct dolls and drawings as well as toy telephones and hand puppets to aid the interviewing process.

"Many of the younger victims don't want to talk directly to the interviewer about their experience," said Lori Johns, CARE House Coordinator. "Instead, they will carry on a conversation through the toy telephone or through a puppet to describe what happened to them. Our rooms are set up to accommodate these difficult interviews."

More important than getting convictions, CARE House's primary

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mission is to reduce the trauma to children and families. According to a current study on the effectiveness of CARE House by Wayne State University's Center for Urban Studies, "... the responses by parents and guardians regarding their experiences at CARE House were very positive for their child(ren) as well as themselves..." Therapists were unanimous in expressing that the atmosphere of CARE House was significant in reducing a child's trauma.

Children feel safe here... CARE HOUSE ALSO instills a sense of empowerment in the children that they didn't have before, Johns said. As one child victim told a therapist at CARE House, "I got my own detective, I got my own attorney, and I got my own (case) worker."

"For their personal self esteem, these children need to know that people are listening, caring, and acting on their behalf," Johns said. One of the most effective ways to reduce the trauma to the child is to minimize the number of interviews. For instance, a woman recently

complete and a warrant was issued for the perpetrator's arrest. Because of the solid case the prosecutor had built, the suspect pleaded guilty, avoiding the need for a trial and further testimony from the child.

"Since CARE House was formed, we're better able to remove the perpetrator (instead of the child) from the family unit," said Sandra Knapp, Children's Protective Services-worker for the Department of Social Services. "Previously, we had to place the child with a relative or in a shelter or foster home, until the family unit could be made safe. Removing the children can make them feel like it was their fault."

The importance of the services provided by CARE House and the other agencies is underscored by the pervasiveness of the problem.

According to a nationwide poll of 2,627 men and women by The Los Angeles Times in 1985, more than one in five people said they had been sexually abused as children. The National Center on Child Abuse Prevention Research's survey in 1990 showed "a steady growth in child abuse reports throughout the second half of the 1980's with annual in-

creases averaging around 5 percent since 1985." And in 1990, there were more than 2,680 reported child sexual abuse victims in Michigan, 210 in Oakland County. Officials believe many cases still go unreported.

Since opening two years ago with a grant from the Skillman Foundation, the CARE House has undergone several modifications to accommodate the growing need for its services. The program was moved into a larger house on Franklin Boulevard in the summer of 1990. CARE House also added observation mirrors and hidden microphones and earplugs, so one person could conduct the interview while other agencies observed and fed questions to the interviewer. The program also serves as an excellent training facility for prosecutors, police, Protective Service workers, and therapists.

In the first 11 months of this year, CARE House has already handled 240 cases, that is a 43 percent increase over 166 cases the program had for all of 1990.

"We expect to see a continual increase in cases as the public becomes more aware and determined to stop the abuse," Johns said.


reported to Protective Services that her 5-year-old granddaughter had been sexually assaulted by the boyfriend of the child's mother. The agency immediately investigated the situation to ensure the child wasn't in further danger and then called CARE House.

Two days later, a police detective, a Protective Services worker and a prosecutor met at CARE House to interview the girl. The CARE House staff provided the girl's mother with information about victim advocacy assistance. Within a few days of the interview, the investigation was

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