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## More child abuse victims served as advocacy centers expand in state

By [Erin Beck](#), Public Safety Reporter

CHRIS DORST | Gazette-Mail photos

A child served by the child advocacy center in Mingo County talks to Tiffany Brashear, a therapist for Family Options, at the center. Child advocacy centers provide places for abuse victims to talk about the trauma in a child-friendly, supportive environment.



Child advocacy center director Beth Cook (left) leads a meeting of the Mingo County center's multi-disciplinary team. Multiple team members, including law enforcement, a prosecutor and child protective services work to improve the response to child abuse cases in the community.



Cook is pictured in the room where law enforcement and child protective services wait while child vi



Cook describes how law enforcement and CPS are able to watch interviews with child abuse victims through a live feed.



Brooke Honaker, left, a family advocate, and Tiffany Brashear, a therapist, work at the Mingo County child advocacy center.



Honaker walks into the entrance of the Mingo County CAC office in Williamson.

**WILLIAMSON** — A 5-year-old girl is sexually abused by a family member.

He told her that no one would believe her, but at school, she finally decides to tell a trusted teacher.

The teacher has her tell her counselor.

Police arrive at the school before Child Protective Services, so she next has to tell her story in the back of a cruiser.

At the local hospital, CPS arrives, and she recounts the traumatizing event once again.

That's how it used to happen everywhere in West Virginia. Children who had been through horrific experiences had to relive them over and over again, as soon as they summoned the courage to break their silence.

All along the way, they were internalizing beliefs about the experience, according to Emily Chittenden-Laird, executive director of the West Virginia Child Advocacy Network.

"She thinks she's in trouble," Chittenden-Laird said. "The police are pulling up in front of her school where her friends can see, and what do 5-year-olds think about the police? Well, they're going to take me to jail or somebody's going to jail or I'm in trouble. This is complicated stuff for kids to digest and experience. There were all these unchecked messages that ultimately a lot of times left kids feeling like they weren't believed."

The children wondered, "Why do I have to keep telling my story so many times?" Chittenden-Laird said. "The first time, did they not believe me?"

The reporting still happens in a similar manner in some places in West Virginia.

But over the last 15 years, in most counties, it's no longer the case.

Since the first child advocacy center opened, 36 counties are now served by 20 accredited child advocacy centers around the state.

Eight counties, including Cabell, Putnam, Jackson, Lewis, Barbour, Taylor, Preston and Pendleton counties, have expressed interest, according to the West Virginia Child Advocacy Network.

In the counties served, disclosing abuse is now a much different experience.

Assuming schools, police and others follow the proper protocols, instead of children telling the story to many different people, they are taken directly to the local center, where trained forensic interviewers conduct the interview one time.

Police and CPS can watch behind two-way mirrors or on live video, and even request that the interviewer get certain additional information they may need for evidence.

The interview is also recorded, so that kids won't have to testify later.

Before she became director of the statewide network, Chittenden-Laird worked with victims at the center in Greenbrier County.

“I used to get asked all the time, how do you do this work? And it was really hard for me to convey that I don’t leave my job depressed every day. Even though these kids are sharing some really weighty things they have experienced and it is sad, the reason that I think I can get up every morning and go to my job is because when a child left, they would say ‘When can I come back and play?’”

## **‘No child slips through the cracks’**

Last week, the West Virginia Child Advocacy Network released data on the increase in new children served as a result of the expansion of child advocacy centers and support from law enforcement and community members.

Since they started collecting the data in 2008, they have seen an 82.39 percent increase in the number of new victims served, from 1,806 in fiscal year 2008-09 to 3,294 in fiscal year 2014-15.

From fiscal year 2013-14 to 2014-15, they saw a 14.6 percent increase, from 2,874 to 3,294.

Mingo County is an example of one county that came together to establish a center in recent years.

Supporters in Mingo County partnered with the Logan County Child Advocacy Center, and the center had its grand opening about a year ago, in October 2013.

Both counties were able to get their centers established through the support of the county commissions.

Other communities do it different ways. There are grants, corporate sponsorships, donations and various sources of funding, although it’s always a struggle.

But one essential piece must exist in every community for centers to open up, according to Beth Cook, director of the Logan and Mingo centers.

“You have to have community support, or you’re not going to have a center that works,” she said.

Now, instead of being surrounded by the cold environment of a police station, kids who visit the center in Mingo County are instead surrounded by puzzles, stuffed animals, blocks and colorful murals.

“It’s a whole different flavor,” Cook said.

Once a month, a team of people involved in child abuse cases, including law enforcement, the prosecutor, CPS and others, meet to track cases, share resources and problem-solve.

After a recent meeting, they reflected on the changes they’ve seen in their county.

Teresa Maynard, the Mingo County prosecutor, said from her perspective, “the greatest benefit is that no child slips through the cracks.

“Before, sometimes they were being handled by law enforcement, and if law enforcement made a determination not to charge, then I never found out about those kids.”

That follow-up means a lot to Sherry Hatfield. As a domestic violence victim advocate at the Tug Valley Recovery Shelter, she often worried about what happened to the kids she saw at the shelter.

Hatfield said, “We can see that things are being done, that help is there, and that justice is being done for these children.”

Maynard said the number of cases prosecuted has increased in Mingo County, although since a different prosecutor was in charge before 2013, it’s difficult to tie that directly to the center.

“It makes better evidence from my perspective, and it increased the likelihood I get pleas,” she said.

The West Virginia Child Advocacy Network also provided information on whether perpetrators of victims served by the center were prosecuted.

While the number of people convicted is small, the number of perpetrators convicted by plea has increased by about 27 percent, from 165 in 2009-10, to 209 in 2014-15.

The number of those convicted at trial has varied over the years, from eight in 2011-12 to 25 in 2009-10 and 31 in 2014-15.

Sgt. Milton Lively, detachment commander for the State Police in Williamson and another team member, said now that the center is established, his officers are more likely to get the evidence needed to pursue cases, because of the expertise of the trained forensic interviewers.

“If you have a victim that’s a very young age, these interviewers are trained to communicate with those children and to make them comfortable in their environment,” he said. “If somebody brings them into a police station, they may feel intimidated or kind of closed up because it’s an environment where they may not be comfortable.”

Team members also noted that while police may be concerned about outcomes for abused children, child advocates are more likely to be able to match them with the appropriate resources they need for healing and follow up with them later. Child advocacy centers also do on-site therapy.

“I don’t know how to say this any differently,” Cook said. “We don’t want these kids to be invisible.”

## **Preventing PTSD**

Tiffany Brashear, a therapist whose employer contracts with the center, said that before the center opened, therapy wasn't an option for families without transportation or the gas money to get there.

She said the trauma-based therapy she provides can help prevent post-traumatic stress disorder.

"They'll never forget, but we can help them learn to heal from the trauma," she said.

Brooke Honaker, a family advocate for the center, is responsible for helping families get through the experience. She described regularly working with distraught children and panicked families, but she doesn't hate her job.

"I love to see them get treatment, and then I love to see the outcome of therapy and them end up being OK," she said.

Her role can be anything from helping them find the money to pay a power bill to scheduling therapy.

"If they have an exam, I'm right there with them to tell them it's OK, and it's going to be OK, and it may not seem like it is, but later on down the road, we will get through this," she said.

Another effect of the centers is more difficult to measure.

The subject of abuse, a historically unreported crime that some victims mistakenly believed they should be ashamed of, is now less of a secret in Mingo County, according to Maynard, the prosecutor.

"When the center opened, it really became a topic of conversation among people," she said.

"When I'm out in the community, people ask me what the child advocacy center does."

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