

**COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
Task Force on Child Protection**

May 14, 2012

**Testimony of
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Chairman Heckler and Members and staff of the Task Force on Child Protection, thank you for the opportunity to present on Child Advocacy Centers today.

As the Director of the Bucks County Children's Advocacy Center, I hope to provide you with the perspective of a relatively new CAC that serves a county with a population of over 625, 000 residents and consists of rural, urban and suburban communities. While the idea of a children's advocacy center in Bucks County was continually discussed over the past decade, it wasn't until several major changes in leadership occurred 2007 that it started to become a reality. Since both police and child protective services must respond and investigate allegations of child abuse in the majority of our cases, coordination of these responses and investigations became a priority for Bucks County. These leaders understood that uncoordinated investigations can easily interfere with each other due to a lack of information sharing. In addition, it was clearly understood that when different professionals interview children on multiple occasions, it can become virtually impossible to ensure that information elicited has not been contaminated by prior interviews. Multiple, uncoordinated interviews can communicate to child victims that they are not believed and can cause additional trauma by forcing children to repeatedly recall events without the support of a trained mental health professional.

In 2009, the Bucks County Children's Advocacy Center was officially established as a collaborative effort by the Bucks County District Attorney's Office, Bucks County Children and Youth Social Services, Network of Victim Assistance, Bucks County Health Improvement Partnership and local law enforcement to redefine how we confront the issue of child maltreatment. Through a coordinated, multi-disciplinary approach the goals of the Bucks County Children's Advocacy Center are to: (1) reduce the repetition of child interviews; (2) ensure that qualified, experienced personnel conduct the interviews of children; (3) provide for the efficient use of all available community resources necessary for the protection, support and rehabilitation of the child; (4) support the child and non-offending caregiver throughout the months and years of the prosecution process; and (5) provide ongoing training and education to the professional community and community as a whole on issues affecting the investigation and prosecution of child abuse.

Professionals, who are mandated reporters, often identify the reasons for not reporting suspected child abuse as a lack of trust, understanding, consistency and confidence in the systems responsible for responding to child abuse allegations. The Bucks County Children's Advocacy Center has been able to create a coordinated structure that has improved the consistency of an effective, child focused response to child abuse allegations.

At the Bucks County Children's Advocacy Center, a multi-disciplinary team, including law enforcement, prosecution, medical, mental health, victim advocacy and child protective services professionals, works together under one roof to provide a coordinated response to reports of suspected child sexual and physical abuse. The atmosphere at the Center is child focused, sensitive, respectful and safe. Child victims do not have to endure the stress of redundant interviews and the trauma of hectic police departments or emergency rooms.

For children who have been abused, the Child Advocacy Center is a process, where the various competing demands of major institutions can be brought together in one facility to provide services to the child and family. The CAC facilitates a comprehensive approach to working with child abuse victims that places the needs of the child first, while making certain that all members of the multidisciplinary team are fully engaged.

Every child advocacy center is unique in structure to fit its own community's needs and Bucks County is no exception. The Bucks County Children's Advocacy Center is administered through the Network of Victim Assistance, which is a non-profit comprehensive victim service organization that serves rape victims and victims of other serious crimes. In the relatively short period of time that the Bucks County Children's Advocacy Center has been operating, there have been numerous successes to highlight. Bucks County has 46 police departments and every single police department signed onto the CAC inter-agency agreement to be fully supportive and engaged in the CAC process, which occurred much faster than anyone anticipated. In order to provide a convenient location for all children and their family members, the Bucks CAC has opened three locations in Jamison, Perkasie and Fairless Hills. Upon developing our CAC, our multi-disciplinary team members recommended that the CAC hire two neutral forensic interviewers. The forensic interviewers not only have the competency based, specialized training but more importantly receive continuous ongoing education and undergo intensive peer review in order to continuously improve their practice. In October 2011, our MDT members strived to exceed all national standards and received national accreditation through the National Children's Alliance.

Prior to the Children's Advocacy Center in Bucks County, children and families were often asked to wait for support services, such as therapy, until an investigation was completed, which often took months. With the Bucks County Children's Advocacy Center, children are able to quickly receive necessary services such as medical evaluations, mental health services, personal safety education and victim advocacy services. Another important benefit has been the improved relationships between child protective services, medical, law enforcement, victim services and the district attorney's office. Cross training has been an invaluable tool for every discipline to learn and understand each other's role, responsibilities and the specific applicable rules, regulations and laws. One of our challenges was ensuring that children receive a high quality medical evaluation from a provider that has a specialization in child abuse forensics. Recently, the CAC received a grant to improve the number of children receiving a medical evaluation through a stronger, more defined relationship with Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. Prior to the CAC, it was common to see more lag time in the investigation since they were waiting for information or consult from another partner. With the CAC process, all multi-disciplinary professionals meet after the forensic interview to discuss the next steps, which include investigation tactics and case service plan for the child and family. Professionals identify that

they are more confident in their decisions about next steps since coordination and information sharing gives everyone a fuller picture of the situation. Professionals have found that investigations are completed faster since there is a plan in place when professionals leave the CAC and everyone has had the ability to consult and confer. If the multi-disciplinary team is confident that no child abuse occurred, the accused can be vindicated in a more expedient fashion.

As a relatively new child advocacy center, the Bucks County Children's Advocacy Center has annual operating expenses over \$215,000. Since funding through the National Children's Alliance and Bucks County Children and Youth Services is limited, the Bucks County Children's Advocacy Center has to raise the remaining balance through private donors, foundations and special events in order to continue to provide high quality services to our children. A challenge that many Children's Advocacy Centers face is sustainability since funding and change in leadership can have drastic and in some cases devastating consequences. Currently, there is no state or federal funding in the proposed budgets for FY2013 designated for CACs. The Child Advocacy Center approach is a proven-effective interdisciplinary approach to the investigation, treatment and prosecution of child abuse and should be explored in other areas of Pennsylvania.

BIO

Leslie Slingsby, LSW is the Director of the Bucks County Children's Advocacy Center through the Network of Victim Assistance (NOVA) in Bucks County. She has a Masters in Social Work with a concentration in non-profit management and social policy from the University of Michigan and has been employed with the Network of Victim Assistance for over 10 years. After serving as the Director of Victim Services, she was hired Director of the Bucks County Children's Advocacy Center in 2009. In her new position, Leslie was responsible for developing and coordinating a community-wide, multi-disciplinary team approach to child abuse allegations. She is responsible for ensuring quality forensic interviews are conducted at three locations. Leslie is responsible for marketing and delivering trainings for multi-disciplinary team professionals, as well as community members, on issues related to child abuse and investigations. She has been responsible for implementing and monitoring several state and federal grant projects and coordinated local program initiatives involving partnership including the Sexual Assault Response Team, the Crimes Against Older Adults Task Force and the Domestic Abuse Fatality Review Team. In addition, she has presented on issues related to sexual violence and victimization at numerous local and state-wide trainings and conferences.