

District Attorney Promotes Local Child Advocacy Group

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The man leaned over and whispered in her ear, "Don't tell your mommie."

Several months later, the four-year-old repeated the comment her grandfather made while he was raping her during his circuit court trial.

"She said it like he said it to her," said Geneva County District Attorney Kirke Adams during a luncheon to discuss child abuse and the need for a local advocacy center.

Adams said there are 11 cases pending in Geneva County circuit court. "Is child abuse happening more or are more children coming forward?"

A four-year-old may not understand the physical harm she is experiencing from a relative until she is eight or nine and talks to a friend, said Adams. But he said more children are talking about abuse with a youth minister or teacher.

"These are the most stressing cases to prosecute," said Adams. "There is nothing worse than a four-year-old getting raped."

In the past four years Adams has served as district attorney for Dale and Geneva counties, he said the services of the Southeast Child Advocacy Center in

Dothan have been used more often.

"Do we need our own eventually?" he asked the 45 people from law enforcement, education and social service agencies who attended the luncheon.

Geneva County District Judge said the Family Resource Center in Hartford is a satellite of the Alfred Saliba Family Services Center in Dothan. He asked if a satellite center could be set up in Geneva County from the Child Advocacy Center in Dothan.

Adams said a room has been offered in the Geneva County Department of Human Resources building for a family advocate and therapist as a way to start to assist a family from Geneva County.

CAC Director Sheryl Walker said the center has already invited officials from Geneva County to sit in on training sessions and has shown the basics of a team interview.

She is interested in a partnership with the court district and is willing to approach the CAC board with a proposal from Geneva County. "Your being here at this luncheon shows you have an interest in protecting children and helping to make a community safe for children."

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The CAC is a coordinating agency that works to address the needs of an abused child. The idea for a center for the court district for Houston and Henry counties began in 1991. The first child was seen in 1994.

Since then, grants have been received to offer services to the neighboring counties of Geneva, Dale, Barbour and Covington. Walker said the CAC is the hub of a wheel and the mental health, police, medical and social service agencies are the spokes.

Walker said the center places an \$80 per hour value on a forensic interview, therapy session or crisis intervention. In 2005-06, Dale and Geneva County received \$42,880 in services. In 2006-07, the value rose to \$73,760. In the first quarter of 2007-08, the value has been \$17,760, or about average for last year.

For 2006-07, the service of a forensic interview or therapy session was given to 190 children from Dale County and 121 from Geneva County.

Adams said in the past a child who told a teacher an adult was molesting her would have to repeat the accusation about 15 times to other education officials, law enforcement and social services case workers.

If in any one of those interviews, there is one word different, it may be all a defense attorney needs to get the person acquitted, said Adams.

But a forensic interview at the CAC puts all those people together to listen to the child talk about the abuse, he said.

The interview room is filled with stuffed animals and resembles a playroom. The interviewer colors with the child and tries to make the session as comfortable as possible.

During the session, the

Grand Jury Indicts 7 on Child Abuse Charges

Editor's Note: The names of the victims or the description of the relationship to the accused are not included to help protect the children.

The charges ranged from touching in a sexual manner to sodomy against seven people indicted during a recent session of the Geneva County Circuit Court Grand Jury.

The following is a list of the people and the charges:

* Stacy Strickland, 32, East County Road 4, Black, sexual abuse of a girl less than age 12 on or about March 17, 2008.

* Soloman Grayson Jr., 42, Avenue G, Hartford, sexual abuse of 14-year-old girl, sodomy by forcible compulsion of 14-year-old girl.

* James Watson Campbell, 38, Skyline Avenue, Geneva, seven counts of sexual abuse of girl less than age 12, beginning in January 2007.

* Stephen Taylor, 28, Nashville, first-degree sodomy of three-year-old child and first-degree sexual abuse of three-year-old child on or about April 1 and August 8, 2007.

* Justin Knight, 20, Carolina Street, Elba, child abuse of 20-month-old on or about December 6 to 10, 2007 by hitting in face with belt.

* Jimmie Ray Goodwin, 51, County Road 1, Samson, first-degree rape and second-degree rape of 18-year-old who has been determined to be mentally deficient.

* Terry Mead, 32, Newton Street, Hartford, first-degree rape of 17-year-old who is physically incapable of resisting.

interviewer will leave the room to make sure law enforcement, court officials or the case worker has all the information that is needed.

"We offer a joint investigation," said Walker. "There are five sets of eyes to decide 'what's next' for a child."

The interview is taped, said Adams. The tape is admissible for a child less than age 12.

"We want the child to be okay," said Adams. "What happens to the abuser is collateral to the safety of the child. Therapy is more important."

He said the center in Dothan has been very helpful with cases. But a family who lives west of Samson does not always have the transportation to get to northeast of Dothan. "And many of the cases happen in

low-income families."

Adams said a person has agreed to donate land south of Daleville for a center to serve the court district.

The budget for the CAC for 2008-09 is \$630,000. The sale of Blue Ribbon T-shirts, door ribbons and SPARKLE bunnies brings in an average of \$100,000. Grants and corporate sponsorships are also received. Only \$60,000 comes from the Alabama Legislature.

"It's sad an organization like this has to beg for money," said Adams. "I don't think the Legislature realizes the problems."

Adams wants to form a task force to discuss the need for a child advocacy center. The first meeting will be a lunch on June 13 at McLin's Restaurant in Daleville.