

INSIDIOUS: CHILD ABUSE FESTERS UNSEEN IN HOOD COUNTY

'A healing place'

One nonprofit central to the fight against child abuse

BY CHRISTINE DORAN
HOOD COUNTY NEWS

She wore a grim expression on her face as she looked at the walls around her.

She took it all in: the handprints that cover, top to bottom, several walls of Paluxy River Children's Advocacy Center.

Purple, red, orange, pink - they represent the hundreds of children, each year, who visit the center to speak with a forensic interviewer about child abuse allegations.

"You're going to make me think too much," Margaret Cohenour, the executive director of the center, said.

"My little ones," she added, looking at the tiny handprints on the walls from toddlers who had likely already become victims of abuse.

BATTLING ABUSE

At the heart of the fight against child abuse is Paluxy River Children's Advocacy Center.

Before the CAC (children's advocacy center) was established in Hood County, allegations of child abuse resulted in victims repeating their stories of abuse to CPS (Child Protective Services), law enforcement, prosecution and anyone else involved in any part of their case.

The process was exhausting and had lasting repercussions for the victims, according to Cohenour and District Attorney Ryan Sinclair, who is also the vice president on the board of Paluxy River Children's Advocacy Center.

"When a child tells about the abuse that they've suffered, it retraumatizes the child. And every time they have to tell it is another traumatic experience," Sinclair said. "The CAC is really designed, primarily, to be a place where that trauma is reduced. So the child comes to the CAC, and they tell (their story) to a specially trained forensic interviewer, and that interview is recorded and can be shared with law enforcement and CPS and prosecution so that the child doesn't have to go to each of those agencies and retell their story."

At the time of their first forensic interview, families are assigned a family advocate.

"Family advocates are responsible for providing support services in a therapeutic environment for child victims and their non-offending family members," Cohenour said. "They provide resources and information for the family, stay in contact with them, help prepare them and accompany them to court."

After a child completes the forensic interview, they add their handprint to the wall of the CAC.

"When I came to work here - and I've only been here two years - there weren't any on that side," Cohenour said, looking down the hallway, covered from top to bottom with children's handprints. "We've done over six hundred interviews a year the last

couple of years. So about 50 interviews a month, which is 50 too many, but we still feel like there are more children that we need to be reaching, so we're really trying to beef up the prevention."

The center serves Hood, Somervell and Erath counties, so the six hundred interviews pull from all three counties.

Cohenour has high expectations for their battle against child abuse.

"I'll tell people, 'We want to eradicate child abuse,' and everybody looks at you like, 'Well that isn't going to happen,' and I say, 'Well, it doesn't mean we don't try.'"

CRIES FOR HELP

When presenting at schools, it's



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TAKING IT IN: Margaret Cohenour, the executive director of Paluxy River Children's Advocacy Center, looked at the hundreds of handprints on the walls of the nonprofit, representing each child who has come to the center for a forensic interview.

common for Traci Cooper, the community education coordinator at the center, to see a child raise their hand and report the abuse they are experiencing at home. Staff at the center refer to this as an "outcry".

"It is not a rare occurrence for students to stay after a presentation to tell me about something that has happened to them. These conversations often result in me making a report to CPS as well as law enforcement," she said. She works alongside Karli Smith, the volunteer outreach specialist at the center.

One in four girls and one in six boys, before the age of 18, is going to be sexually abused, and many of them won't report it, according to Cohenour.

"That is why we're in schools," Cooper said. "I believe that the best prevention is educating our kids. If they know that these things happen, they will know what to do, and hopefully be more likely to report."

Adults frequently approach Cooper after local events to share their own stories of child abuse, which they sometimes haven't shared with anyone before, she said.

Cooper thinks this is because the schools failed to teach them, when they were kids, about child abuse.

"Now we hear kids say that (they have been abused) and we do something about it," she said. "Back then, everybody was afraid to talk about anything like that, and there weren't any presentations for prevention in schools."

Teaching kids about abuse helps them not become victims, according to Cooper and Sinclair.

"Kids need to know what's a good touch and what's a bad touch, and how to discern the difference," Sinclair said. "They need to know that their bodies should be safe from bad touch and people shouldn't touch them bad or hurt them. They need to

hearings and seen (a perpetrator) get sentenced for 99 years and celebrated that. But there's still a wife and kids who have to figure out how they're going to pick up the pieces of their lives, because this has happened. So, this is where the healing starts."

Once the children begin therapy, the therapists see what's really happening to the children, according to Clinical Director Layna Lankford.

"Speaking from the clinical director perspective, we see a whole different aspect of it once we get into session with the kiddos and kind of see all of the dynamics that are going on," she said. "We kind of see a little bit of a different picture than law enforcement, or even our forensic interviewers and family advocates, which is really part of the value of all of us working together and having a multidisciplinary team. Because each component has their specific role, and each role is just as valuable as the other."

Watching the children fight to heal from their trauma is inspirational and rewarding, according to Lankford.

"One of my favorite quotes is, 'Feeling heard is so close to feeling loved that most people can't tell the difference.' And it's really true. And when we can provide that relationship for these kiddos, and you can see it on their faces, when you say something - just the right thing that they need to hear, and it can be different depending on the kid and the session, just telling them that they can't get in trouble in the room - and when they feel seen and heard, then that's when they can start to believe, 'This wasn't my fault. I didn't deserve this.' And they can start to heal."

The staff all fight daily with that singular goal: helping kids find healing.

"It's not always a happy place, but a healing place - a place to begin the journey to healing," Cohenour said.

THE HERO GARDEN

The final step of the journey at Paluxy River Children's Advocacy Center is graduation.

"Once a child completes their treatment, they get a ceremony - kind of a graduation ceremony," Cohenour explained. "And they, with their therapist, paint a rock, and they can put whatever on it they want, and we have a little ceremony. All the staff gathers, they bring in their family members, they get a certificate (called the Hero Award) and a story, and they plant their rock in this garden."

This ceremony is a symbol of their ability to move forward in life and is done to honor them for their bravery and strength as heroes, Lankford and Cohenour explained.

"They're ready to move on to that next level," Cohenour said. "And they can always come back. We'll be here for them as long as we are needed."

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Coronavirus chaos

Advocacy center wrestling with COVID-19 changes

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Concern began to build in Margaret Cohenour, the executive director of Paluxy River Children's Advocacy Center, as she read the swiftly changing regulations and recommendations brought on by COVID-19.

"We had to make a quick shift to remote, just within a few days," she said. "News changed every day. The first day I was just saying, 'Do this, do this, wash your hands,' and then the next day it was like, 'Everybody get out!'"

She laughed at the memory of the chaos, but her tone grew grave quickly. Businesses and nonprofits around the world are struggling, and Paluxy River Children's Advocacy Center is no exception.

"We have to figure this out," she said. "We've got almost everybody equipped with a laptop and the ability to access our dedicated server, to get the information they need, do telehealth, do the reports. And then we're trying to do some additional (preparation) in case there's another surge later on in the summer."

The team at the center has struggled to keep up with changes in protocols.

Traci Cooper, the education coordinator at the center, has transitioned her programs online but doesn't know how to effectively reach everyone she normally would.

"It's kind of like a shot in the dark," she said. "We have to do something."

Trainings are made more difficult because they can't do in-person training; Cooper made YouTube and



Cooper

Facebook presentations for teachers to use in Zoom classes, but now it's more difficult for people to ask clarifying questions, she said.

"It is important for everyone to be educated so that they know how and when to report, and also how to respond to a child that makes an outcry of abuse," she said.

The center planned to expand trainings to the general community this year, rather than focusing exclusively on professional reporters such as teachers.

Their first-ever community-wide "Recognizing and Reporting" lunch was scheduled for April, but was postponed because of the pandemic. They expect to hold it in September.

COVID-19 has impacted services to clients at the center, too; the clinical branch of the organization has moved online.

Therapists have almost entirely shifted to remote therapy, which has presented both challenges and opportunities, according to Cohenour.

"One of the things that COVID-19 has really opened up for us is we've not really ever thought about doing telehealth," she said. "We do everything in person, and there are some people who, really, are thriving and like that and are engaging more than what we would've expected. So we will probably continue doing that once we're back in the office, for those who don't want to come in or who have transportation issues."

But some of their clients have dropped off the radar since COVID-19 hit, whether because of lack of

'... Every kid gets every service that they need, regardless.'

Margaret Cohenour

Executive Director of Paluxy River Children's Advocacy Center

internet, because they prefer in-person, or other unknown causes, according to Cohenour.

"We figure there's probably a 30% reduction in the number of clients that we're engaging in the office, that want to come back to the office, that won't do the telehealth," she said. "So we've been able to shift most people, but with others we're having to be a lot more creative on how we reach them."

Some therapists have still been performing in-person sessions with their clients; especially with young children, connecting over a phone or video call can be difficult, Cohenour explained.

In addition to challenges surrounding how to provide services during the pandemic, there are fundraising concerns.

"Due to COVID-19, fundraising obviously has kind of been completely shut down," Patricia Morales, the finance director at the center, said.

They have canceled and postponed events due to the pandemic, and are still trying to assess how that will impact them long-term.

"We have had to postpone our gala twice," Cohenour said. Initially, it was postponed until May. Their gala is now set for July 25, at limited capacity, to meet safety guidelines.

"We're fortunate people haven't forgotten we're here. Sometimes I worry, because we're not the front

line - we're kind of on the back scene, dealing with that uglier thing that you can't put out there. We talked about, 'How do you go out and present a positive message about child abuse?' And so I think that's been a dilemma for a lot of us at CACs (children's advocacy centers)."

But Cohenour remains optimistic. "We're not too concerned yet, because we did well last year with some fundraising," she said. "But if I can't do it this year, I'm going to be more concerned. But we're optimistic. I feel like we're going to be okay. I really do. I feel like we will get through this."

The center has sources of funding beyond individual donations, such as state grants, so their basic needs will likely be met regardless of the events, Cohenour and Morales explained.

Their drop in fundraising isn't their top priority, according to Cohenour.

"That didn't stop with the virus - child abuse didn't stop. We continue to stay focused on that commitment and doing what we can do to promote that healing. And we're continuing to provide the services. That's definitely the focus - every kid gets every service that they need, regardless."

Cohenour continues to search for new ways to reach children in the community during COVID-19.

"We've got to make sure we're doing everything we can," she said. "But our hands are tied a little bit."

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