

## **Stepping Stones Children's Advocacy Center**

### **Organizational Capacity:**

Stepping Stones Children's Advocacy Center is a program of Family & Children's Center, a private, not for profit agency that has designated staff, a Program Director and Family Advocate that manages the day to day operations of the program.

### **Child Focused Setting:**

A lot of care and thought went into the design and implementation of Stepping Stones. The Coulee Region Children's Advocacy Center Task Force who was first charged with the responsibility of making Stepping Stones a reality, created a warm, welcoming physical environment that is comfortable and safe and helps lessen the trauma a child can experience while being interviewed for a child abuse investigation. But Stepping Stones is much more than a facility. It's a program that takes great care in providing the best service and support possible for children of all ages and all backgrounds.

### **Cultural Competency and Diversity:**

To ensure we meet the needs of every child and family that walk through our doors, we have formally incorporated a Cultural/Diversity Plan for how we address the specific and unique needs of our children and families. This plan helps us ensure that provisions are made for clients, of all cultures and/or with special needs, throughout the investigation, medical evaluations and follow-up services and care. We also took great strides in creating a physical environment that is reflective of the community in which we serve. This was done by incorporating cultural items such as art work, literature, games, books, etc.

### **Multidisciplinary Team (MDT):**

Our primary mission aside from lessening the trauma children can experience is also to provide a multidisciplinary team approach to better serve our children and families. Our MDT is comprised of the following core disciplines – our local law enforcement jurisdictions in the County, the La Crosse County Department of Human Services Initial Assessment Unit, the La Crosse District Attorney's Office, medical personnel from both Gundersen Lutheran and Franciscan Skemp Healthcare, mental health professionals and our staff.

We worked very hard from the time of inception to develop and have in place written protocols for how we handle our child abuse investigations and interventions. To pull it all together we incorporated a formal document called an interagency agreement that commits all agencies's previously mentioned to support our MDT approach. This document clearly outlines how case collaboration is initiated, how information is communicated between agencies and how confidentiality is protected.

### **Forensic Interviews:**

Every forensic interview of a child is conducted by a specially trained professional that utilizes an interview protocol that is non-leading, legally sound and non-duplicative. At this time we have approximately 17 professionals trained that use one of the following interview protocols, RATAAC or Cognitive Graphic. The purpose of a forensic interview is to obtain factual, accurate details regarding the abuse allegation in a manner that minimizes the trauma to the victim. Our MDT members, mainly law enforcement officers, will observe the interview as it takes place. The interviewer and investigator(s) will communicate throughout the interview process. This is to help provide feedback and input to the

interviewer so that we can get the details and information we need from the child one time; thus reducing the number of times a child must explain the details of his/her abuse experience

### **Victim Support/Advocacy:**

Leslie Smith, our Family Advocate on staff, provides immediate support to each caregiver that accompanies a child to Stepping Stones. Leslie provides crisis intervention, education about the investigation and legal process, assessment and identification of needed community resources and linkages to medical and mental health services. She provides up-to-date information and on-going support to children and their families throughout the investigation and criminal justice process and ensures services are in place to support the child's family in resolving the abuse.

### **Medical Evaluation:**

For children in need of specialized medical evaluations we provide a referral to one of our healthcare facilities, Gunderson Lutheran Medical Center or Franciscan Skemp Healthcare. Specially trained Pediatricians and SANE Nurses are available at both locations to do forensic medical exams. The purpose of the medical evaluation is to assess the child's overall health, collect and preserve physical evidence (if present); identify and treat any injury or infection and reassure the child and family about any concerns related to the child's physical health. In addition, at both locations there are pediatric social workers who assist the medical personnel and the family while on site at the hospitals.

### **Mental Health:**

One of the main referral sources for families provided by Leslie is mental health services. She maintains a list of mental health providers that specialize in trauma-focused mental health treatment. It is well known and understood that timely therapeutic intervention is critical to facilitate the child's healing from trauma and help them on the road to recovery.

### **Case Review:**

Case Review occurs once a month in La Crosse County and engages many of our child welfare disciplines. It is a facilitated discussion and information sharing meeting that involves the investigation, case status and services and support needed by the child and family. Case review maximizes information-sharing among all parties and promotes better decision-making based on the involvement and expertise of everyone involved in that child and families life.

### **Case Tracking:**

At this time, Stepping Stones utilizes a series of databases to collect and report client, family and offender demographics, referrals made to families and to track case outcomes including disposition and criminal justice outcomes. It is our intent to have one case tracking system that becomes a storehouse of case information that helps monitor trends and reduce cases "falling through the cracks."