

Examining Child Abuse and the Deloris M. Perry Children's Advocacy Center in Lowndes

County/Valdosta, Georgia

By

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Abstract: This paper will examine the social problem of Child Abuse in Lowndes County/Valdosta Georgia and the creation and impacts of the Deloris M. Parrish Children's Advocacy Center (CAC) by examining their cooperative and supportive relationships with community partners and law enforcement agencies. The following questions served as the principal guides for the development of this project: What is the historical background of the identification of Child Abuse in Valdosta/Lowndes County? What are the identified environments that incidents of Child Abuse occur? Why were Child Advocacy Services needed? When was the CAC established? What are its purpose(s)/mission? What has been its legacy, i.e., how effective or not has its programs and partnership efforts been? Who/what community partners, including city and county governments, are actively engaging in delivery of services to the identified children and their families? How are resources identified and acquired, including operational funding? Resources utilized for this project include library research tools, the Children's Advocacy Center's Website ([caclowndes.org](http://caclowndes.org)) and responses to personal interviews with Brenda Hodges, Director of the CAC; Jennifer Lockhart, Office Manager of the CAC and Joyce Evans, CAC Board Member and Commissioner, District 1 of Lowndes County.

## Introduction/Scope of the Social Problem

Every family and community's life-blood is realized in their children however, children and their safety and welfare have historically been neglected especially in instances of abuse. Most children are taught to trust adults or authority figures like police, doctors and firemen. Child abuse is a broad term that covers physical, emotional and sexual mistreatment of children. Children are the most innocent members of our society and unfortunately, their innocence is shattered and exploited usually by an adult or someone whom they perceive is an authority figure or caregiver. Child abuse is an action or behavior that targets children for maltreatment **and** it is also non-action when someone who either knows or suspects mistreatment/abuse fails to take any action or one that purposely neglects a child or children by not providing for their basic physical needs—like starvation (denial of food) as a form of punishment or locking a child in a trunk or suitcase as punishment (denial of physical freedom/movement). The evidences of abuse can manifest themselves physically—like bruises and contusions, or they can be sexual or emotional in nature. According to the National Children's Advocacy Center's training handbook "Sexual abuse occurs when a person forces a child to have any form of sexual contact or makes a child perform sexual acts. Sexual abuse may involve touching private parts (clothed or unclothed), penetration using an object, forced sexual acts between children, or making the child view, read or participate in pornography. Sexual abuse is also known as molestation and exploitation." (Hagan & Case, 1988, Pg.21) Herrmann, Jr., also supports with "Children are helpless victims [and] using children to meet the sexual needs of adults, without regard for the children's emotional and physical needs, is sexual exploitation." (Herrmann, Jr., 1987, Pg. 523) All forms of abuse have an emotional or psychological impact on the victims. While sometimes the physical evidence of abuse, like bruises and contusions, may disappear from being seen

outwardly on the body. The emotional damage has been far reaching requiring extensive therapy and in some instances irreversible, the results of which include suicide attempts, suicide and perpetuating abusive behavior on others. Again, Herrmann, Jr., validates this point with “Exploited children carry the effects for many years in an agonizing struggle with sexual dysfunction, an inability to trust, relationship instability, poor concentration, insomnia, depression, suicide and suicide attempts, self-mutilation, substance abuse, enuresis, encopresis, academic underachievement, hysterical reactions, homicidal rage, genital disfigurement, genital bleeding, death by asphyxiation, various infections and sexually transmitted diseases, possible cervical cancer, infertility, and the like.” (Herrmann, Jr. 1987, Pg. 524) Offering additional support and according to Egeland, Stroufe and Erickson, “Research indicates that physically abused children lack persistence and ego control, which negatively affect their ability to benefit from intervention.” (Culp, et.al., 1987, Pg. 497)

This project will examine the social problem of Child Abuse in Lowndes County / Valdosta Georgia and the creation and impacts of the Deloris M. Parrish Children’s Advocacy Center (CAC) through their cooperative and supportive relationships with community partners and law enforcement agencies. The following questions served as the principal guides for the development of this project: What is the historical background of the identification of Child Abuse in Valdosta/Lowndes County? What are the identified environments that incidents of Child Abuse occur? Why were Child Advocacy Services needed? When was the CAC established? What are its purpose(s)/mission? What has been its legacy, i.e., how effective or not has its programs and partnership efforts been? Who/what community partners, including city and county governments, are actively engaging in delivery of services to the identified children and their families? How are resources identified and acquired, including operational funding?

Resources utilized for this project include library research tools, the Children’s Advocacy Center’s Website (caclowndes.org) and responses to personal interviews and follow-up telephone conversations with Brenda Hodges, Director of the CAC; Jennifer Lockhart, Office Manager of the CAC and Joyce Evans, CAC Board Member and Commissioner, District 1 of Lowndes County.

CACs in the state of Georgia are the result of our state legislature issuing an unfunded mandate (in essence a requirement that has no funds attached for the expenses to implement) because issues related to child welfare and the responsible agencies and their “inability to effectively coordinate the activities of law enforcement agencies, the courts, and child protective agencies [which] has often proven disastrous when dealing with children who are victims of sexual and physical abuse.” (Doss & Idleman, 1994, Pg. 676) Wells adds that “Most states require medical and school personnel to report known or suspected cases of child maltreatment [and that] most laws are in compliance with the federal statute that requires that all reports of child abuse and neglect be investigated (Child Abuse Prevention & Treatment Act, 1974).” (Wells, et.al., 1989, Pg. 45)

Our CAC was established using the national model of the National Children’s Advocacy Center in Huntsville, Alabama. According to Newman, “Child Advocacy Centers (CACs) were established after the model was first used in Huntsville, Alabama in 1985. CACs have since developed to facilitate collaboration among agencies involved in the investigation of criminal cases of sexual and physical abuse. The purpose of these centers is to provide a “comprehensive, culturally competent, multidisciplinary team response to allegations of child abuse in a dedicated, child-friendly setting” (National Children’s Alliance, 2003, Pg. xx).” (Newman, et.al. 2005, Pg. 165-6) Doss and Idleman further clarify that “In 1987, the Georgia Legislature [issued

an unfunded mandate] that each of its 159 counties establish a formal committee made up of representatives from law enforcement, child protective services, school systems, and county advocacy groups to handle cases of sexual and physical abuse of children.” (Doss & Idleman, 1994, Pg. 675)

Effective CACs can be described as ‘one-stop-shops’ because of the variety of services that are delivered from one facility whose environment is conducive to children and their comfort. According to Newman, et.al. there are “five major reasons for using the CAC when investigating cases of child abuse. They [provide a] (1) child-friendly environment; (2) [offer] referrals, support, assistance with counseling, medical exam; (3) expertise of interviewers at the CAC; (4) formal protocol when a sexual abuse case is investigated; and (5) access to video and audio equipment and a two-way mirror.” (Newman, et.al. 2005, Pg. 170) Along with the benefits of having a variety of services provided for the abused child and their non-offending parents or caregivers, “[a]dvantages [that communities with CACs have] include more resources, a visible identity, facilities and equipment for conducting child-friendly interviews, more accessible investigative team members and greater expertise among trained child interview specialists.” (Newman, et.al. 2005, Pg. 166)

CACs are considered an important, and in some cases a vital component of child protection services for abused children. The expert staff of CACs work in cooperative support as partners each understanding the functionality of the other and all working together to provide services to the abused and their non-offending caregivers and gather evidence in support of prosecution of the perpetrators of these types of crimes against children. In other words, all agencies involved work in collaboration holding “perhaps most important...the interests of the child, and no other interest, at heart.” (Flekkoy, 1989, Pg. 116) According to Wolfeich &

Loggins, “[t]he mission of CACs is to offer a seamless continuum of service to families entering the child protection team and by doing so, decrease trauma experienced by child victims of abuse and improve the efficiency of the investigative process.” (Wolfteich & Loggins, 2007, Pg. 334)

### The Deloris M. Parrish Children’s Advocacy Center

The Deloris M. Parrish Children’s Advocacy Center (CAC) is the community based organization chosen for this project. The CAC was formed in 1997 the result of a Department of Family and Children Services Abuse Protocol Committee task force. According to their website, “In 1995, before the Children’s Advocacy Center was established, Lowndes County had over 1,100 cases of child abuse reported to the Department of Family and Children Services. Only 310 were confirmed cases of child abuse, with twelve arrests and ten convictions. Given this failing system, in 1996 the Lowndes County Abuse Protocol Committee recommended the formation of a task force to evaluate establishing a CAC. In June 1997, the task force officially became the Board of Directors of the Children’s Advocacy Center of Lowndes County, Inc. receiving non-profit corporate status and opening its doors at 204 E. Magnolia Street, Valdosta, Georgia. Help and Healing for the abused children and their non-offending family members began and prosecution rates have increased tremendously.” (caclowndes.org, 2009) CACs are “specialized investigative centers [that] involve a multidisciplinary, child-focused approach to child abuse investigation and the co-location of child protective service agencies in a comfortable, private and child-friendly setting.” [And CACs provide] “service using a “one stop shopping” approach, [by doing so] child victims and their families are less traumatized by the system through multiple, repetitive interviews, assignment to various caseworkers, and by having to travel from one agency to the next for services.” (Wolfteich & Loggins, 2007, Pg. 334)

In our initial interview, Brenda Hodges-Johnson, Director of the CAC described the CAC stating that “The CAC is a child-focused community resource center created to minimize the trauma of child victims of sexual and physical abuse by responding to their immediate and long-term needs in a child-friendly, safe environment. We use what is referred to as a multi-disciplinary team approach that involves coordinating efforts between representatives from the medical community, child protective services (DFCS), law enforcement, prosecution and mental health providing investigation assessment and treatment of the children and their non-offending family members in order to maximize prosecution of those who commit crimes against children. The CAC also meets the community’s needs in the areas of education and prevention of child abuse. This information is also available on our website and in pamphlets that we disseminate throughout the community and with our community partners.” The environment of the CAC facility is specifically designed to be child-friendly and less intimidating than environments like hospitals, schools or police stations. According to Newman, et.al, “the CAC facility, which is by definition child-friendly, provides an essential alternative to conducting the interview at the police station or hospital which has an institutional and intimidating atmosphere or in the child’s own home where the perpetrator often lives.” (Newman, et.al. 2005, Pg. 170)

The CAC uses a multi-disciplinary team (MDT) approach/structure with several community partners in the delivery of services to abused children. Doss and Idlemen state that “At a minimum, the county protocol committees were intended to include [a representative from] the county Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) field office, district attorney, sheriff and/or other major city/county law enforcement departments, youth services agency, appropriate school system(s), and county child advocacy groups.” (Doss & Idleman, 1994, Pg. 677) Representatives from these groups comprise the service delivery aspects of addressing



child abuse in Lowndes County but the CAC also requires partnerships that support its fiscal operations.

Brenda Hodges, CAC Director and Joyce Evans, CAC Board Member both confirmed during interviews that “the biggest challenge that the CAC faces is identifying and securing consistent funding sources for its operations, facility maintenance and equipment upgrades as well as recruiting and retaining competent and credentialed staff.” The CAC is a non-profit entity that is wholly dependent on grants and donations from private individuals and other philanthropic organizations. All monetary gifts are tax-deductible. Donations are not always financial. In fact the CAC welcomes donations of children’s books, toys, children’s DVD’s, blank DVD’s and individually packaged snacks. It [the CAC] is also a United Way agency and receives funds for its operations from the Lowndes County Board of Commissioners. Brenda said that “we continue to approach the City of Valdosta for community-services funding during their budget preparation process but we have not been successful for the last three (3) years. The Lowndes County Board of Commissioners, on the other hand, require all organizations that were seeking funds to prepare a formal request packet that included statistical information followed by a personal presentation to the Board at a budgetary work-session. We have been successful and have received support from Lowndes County in the amount of \$25,000 / year for the last two fiscal years. We launch extensive Capital Campaigns when we are preparing for a capital project, like a major building renovation or property purchase such as was the case when we moved into this, our current facility, located at 200 West Moore Street, which provided more space for staff and clients. We’re only twelve years old and our staff has grown from one to five employees that include a Executive Director, Clinical Director, Child & Adolescent Therapist, Case Manager and Office Manager. In the area of staffing, our most pressing need right now is

to hire a full-time child and adolescent therapist due to the increasingly high number of children being served by the CAC.” The CAC has a thirty-four (34) member Board of Directors and a twenty-five member Advisory Board.

In an interview with Joyce Evans, CAC Board Member and District 1 Lowndes County Commissioner, when asked “How would you describe your role and do you perceive that there may be an issue of conflict-of-interest since you are involved in over-sight of both organizations, especially as it relates to the Board of Commissioners granting funds to the CAC?” The following was her response: “Children and the protection of their innocence has always been a top priority for me. I am the mother of five (5) and now retired owner/operator of two (2) Day Care Centers, one in Valdosta and the other in Tifton. I am also a certified childcare specialist and was appointed by the then Governor Roy Barnes to the Georgia State Head-Start Review Commission. I believe that engaging in public service, having some influence on its development and delivery, is a responsibility that we all share as members of this community. I also believe that, in fact, it’s a part of my personal mantra, that all organizations should work together to best use the limited resources available. But using resources, especially public tax dollars, comes with fiscal responsibility, measurable results and a level of transparency, knowing what is done with the money, for the operations of recipient agencies. I don’t believe that my dual role associated with both the CAC and the BOC [Board of Commissioners] is in conflict because any interested agency that is seeking funds in the form of grants have to meet the same criteria via the completion of a budget request packet followed by a formal presentation to the Board, which has to include measurable/verifiable results. I am one of a four (4) member board, three (3) are voting as you know, and we all sit on various community [organization] boards in the community. My decision or vote, on every matter that is presented for consideration, has

equal weight [the same value] with the other commissioners. There is no personal avenue of enrichment for me, my time and position on the CAC Board of Directors is an un-paid position. My joy is realized, as I believe all of our community is enriched, when needed services are provided with positive results. Also, the Board's action has to be in compliance with the [unfunded] mandate that the State issued for the creation of CACs. Whatever I can do, be that over-sight or direct involvement through personal support and presence in support of the CAC, because they have consistently produced measurable results in helping the most innocent among us—our children—while also assisting the other partner agencies in the prosecution of the perpetrators of these kinds of crimes, I have promised myself and my community supporters that I will.” Ms. Evans is serving her third four (4) year term as Commissioner of District 1 of the Lowndes County Board of Commissioners.

Inquiring about the programs, services and current statistics that the CAC develops, delivers and tracks, Ms. Hodges referred me to Jennifer Lockhart, CAC Office Manager who provided the following overview and information:

- In 2007, 92,185 reports of child abuse (physical, sexual, emotional abuse and neglect) were made in Georgia with 1,080 in Lowndes County.
- On average 12 children are forensically interviewed at the CAC each month as a result of alleged sexual and/or physical abuse.
- In 2008, the CAC provided services for 425 abused children across all programs (Forensic Interview and Therapy).
- Of the 425 Children Served:

Type of Abuse: Sexual – 82%; Physical – 8%; Domestic Violence – 10%

Gender: Female – 319; Male – 106

Age: 0 - 6 Years – 138; 7 - 12 years – 165; 13 – 18 years – 122

Race: Caucasian – 259; African American – 138; Hispanic – 4; Other

Race – 22; Asian and Pacific Islander – 2

“An overview of the programs and services are available on our website

[caclowndes.org] but they are outlined as follows:

- Forensic Interviews: The CAC provides on-site forensic interviews at the request of law enforcement and/or the Department of Family and Children Services where child abuse is suspected. Team member collaborate, coordinate community services, make referrals for therapy and answer questions the non-offending family members or caregiver may have. Forensic Interviews are conducted in a child-friendly environment by a certified Forensic Interviewer. The forensic interview reduces the trauma of disclosure, minimizes the number of interviews and preserves the child’s statement for court purposes.
- Clinical Therapy Program: The CAC is dedicated to meeting the treatment needs of each individual child, family and non-offending caregivers. Services are offered on-site or through referral. The CAC staff consists of a licensed Clinical Director and Adolescent Therapist with experience and specialized training working with child victims of abuse and their family members. Therapy services include: individual, family and group therapy; evaluation and assessment; support; crisis intervention; guidance; court preparation; advocacy and education.
- Community Education and Prevention Speakers: Knowledgeable speakers are available through the CAC to speak to any organization about prevention and

education of child abuse. Materials, pamphlets, booklets and display boards are available.”

In conclusion, based on the interviews as well as the statistical information that the CAC has been maintaining since its creation I have to conclude that the cooperative efforts, program components and established protocols of the CAC have been a success. The community benefits are immeasurable because helping just one child to find a sense of wholeness cannot be measured! They, our children, are our most innocent treasures and while “[c]hildren have no influence on the choice of persons or composition of bodies responsible for decisions concerning or influencing the conditions under which they grow up” (Flekkoy, 1989, Pg. 114) our CAC provides invaluable services through their cooperative efforts and purposed understanding of the interrelations of participating entities to help ‘fix’ their ‘broken’ state and spirits.

As examined earlier, Lowndes County’s history, in terms of arrests, investigations and prosecution rates were dismal at best. Doss and Idleman support that “Although Georgia has not always been a leader in child welfare, its attempt to uniformly implement an organizational innovation within an extremely heterogeneous agency environment may produce useful information regarding our efforts to help the most helpless among us, abused children.” (Doss & Idleman, 1994, Pg. 687) The Lowndes CAC continues to make progress and is actively making a difference in the quality of life for the most innocent among us—our children and their non-offending family members or caregivers.

It appears that the CAC is utilizing effective avenues via the established relationships to various community organizations as evidence by the make-up or composition of their Board of Directors and Board of Advisors but noticeably absent is a representative from the City of Valdosta’s Mayor or Council Members. Since identifying consistent and reliable funding

sources is a principal challenge, according to Brenda Hodges-Johnson, CAC Director, I would suggest, as an avenue to improve cooperation and support, that several persons from each of the boards launch a recruitment campaign, beginning with the City of Valdosta then possibly moving to the smaller municipalities in Lowndes County, to begin to develop another or other possible funding sources.

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