

Children's advocacy group opens center

BY DEE ANNE SHAW

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Last year, police on Grays Harbor opened more than 350 criminal abuse and neglect cases in which children were reportedly raped, molested, fondled, beaten or otherwise abused or neglected.

What happens to these children once a criminal abuse investigation is begun is so frustrating to the cops and caseworkers who deal with it that they set out to change the system.

Typically, the child is interviewed by a police officer at a police station. A caseworker may or may not be present. If not, then the child is interviewed again by a state caseworker.

An appointment is scheduled for a forensic exam to determine the extent and nature of the alleged abuse. These in-depth exams are not conducted on Grays Harbor since no area physicians are currently certified to perform the kind of exam admissible as evidence in court.

The child must be taken to Olympia or Tacoma. The exams often take place days after the abuse or attack is reported to police, which often jeopardizes the quality of physical evidence that can be documented.

More interviews with police and case workers may be necessary before a decision is made on whether enough evidence exists to forward the case to prosecutors for criminal prosecution.

If police forward the case, the prosecutor may want the child interviewed again if key questions weren't asked at the beginning. Or the prosecutor may need to see for himself or herself whether the child will make a good witness. If the case actually does go to court, the story must be told again.

Imagine the burden the child is



Detective Bagley Dr. Hutton

carrying. Trying to function in school while his or her family is in turmoil. Often, a family member is under suspicion. Other family members are dragged into the case as witnesses.

There are variations on the above scenario, but the bottom line is that abused children caught up in a criminal investigations are interviewed again, and again, and again. By different people — in different buildings, in different cities, over months at a time.

The lighting is invariably fluorescent, the setting is bureaucratic and chilly.

At least, that's how the system worked on Grays Harbor until the creation of the Children's Advocacy Center earlier this year. The center's goal is to create a friendly, safe place for children and then bring the professionals to the child.

An interview room is warmly wallpapered, there are cookies on the table, and a coloring table in the corner complete with Crayolas and books. A large mirror on one wall is actually a window so that prosecutors and caseworkers can watch the initial police interview take place. The goal is to bring everyone involved in the case into the same building, where they become a team that confers regularly about the case, explains the center's executive director Valerie Arnold, former deputy director of the Coastal Community Action Program.

See **ADVOCACY**, Page A5

OUR VIEW

Advocacy center for kids now a reality

"Every child deserves the same level of justice."

That's Mike Bagley's credo.

A big man with a smile as big as his heart, Bagley's beat as an Aberdeen Police detective is helping kids.

Over the years, he has seen it all — stories so sad and so did that they sap your soul.

But too many children who have been abused, confused or otherwise scarred by molestation, domestic violence or other crimes get cold comfort from the system.

It was Bagley's persistence that resulted in the opening of the Grays Harbor Children's Advocacy Center this year.

Now, thanks to Bagley and three other Harborites — Tanya Bowers,

Hoquiam's Parks & Recreation director; Maralyn Akayama of the Department of Social & Health Services; and Dr. Steve Hutton of Harbor Pediatrics — every cop and caseworker on Grays Harbor has the opportunity to conduct first-class investigations into reports of child abuse.

Some of our smaller cities may see just one or two of these cases a year. In those towns, the investigation becomes the responsibility of an officer who also has to take his or her turn on patrol. Now they can ask for assistance through the Children's Advocacy Center and from the outset all the people who will be involved in the case will be contacted.

Soon, the Advocacy Center will have an investigator of its own, someone whose specialty is interviewing children.

Even the detectives who have handled many of these abuse cases have found themselves frustrated at the toll the system takes on the children and the families. Now they too have a way to bring all the players together.

The Children's Advocacy Center is not just another government program. It is funded by a combination of grants and private donations, and it will only work so long as the community considers it important enough to support.

By bringing together cops, caseworkers, prosecutors and counselors, the end result should be a system that doesn't put its most vulnerable victims through the wringer before they even get to court.

It's not easy to steer government in a new direction. Bagley, Bowers, Akayama and Hutton have proven that when you won't take no for an answer, there will be a way.

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