

Executive Summary:

Findings from the NCAC Cost-Benefit Analysis of Community Responses to Child Maltreatment

In the three decades since passage of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (1974) a large body of literature demonstrates that child maltreatment has long term negative impacts on children's physical and mental health and that it may also be associated with a host of other social problems including juvenile delinquency and adult criminality. The estimated costs to society from child abuse and its related sequelae are enormous and continue to climb. A report from the Urban Institute recently estimated that costs of government spending on child welfare activities alone were in excess of \$22 billion annually and this figure does not take into account government spending on criminal justice, medical, or mental health services related to child maltreatment.

Since 1985, at least 600 communities across the United States have implemented investigation and treatment programs based on the Child Advocacy Center (CAC) model first developed in Huntsville Alabama as the National Children's Advocacy Center (NCAC). The CAC model promotes an integrated, multidisciplinary, child-friendly approach to the investigation and treatment of child sexual abuse. At the heart of the model is the multidisciplinary team of professionals with expertise in medicine, mental health services, child protection, law enforcement, prosecution, and victim advocacy. Although the CAC model has existed for more than two decades, many communities continue to provide traditional responses to child abuse cases. Unfortunately, traditional responses fail to leverage the full array of services, systems and disciplines commonly involved in the provision of services throughout most CAC communities.

In 2005, the NCAC, funded through a Special Emphasis Grant from the National Children's Alliance, completed work on the first economic evaluation of child advocacy centers. The resulting report provides a review of scholarly studies that have applied economic analysis to costs and benefits from programs seeking to prevent or intervene in child maltreatment. The report also details a cost-benefit analysis undertaken in two counties that use different models of child abuse investigation: One of the counties studied uses the Child Advocacy Center (CAC) model of a multidisciplinary team approach and the other county uses a traditional model of joint investigation by child protection and law enforcement services.

The cost-benefit analysis was conducted to examine the economic and social resources invested in these two different child sexual abuse response protocols and identify the return on investment produced by these protocols. Cost data on salaries, benefits, facilities, and overhead was collected from agency personnel sources and archival accounting records. Benefits data on willingness to pay for perceived CAC benefits was collected from a random sample of taxpayers surveyed in each of the communities. Results of the study suggest that CAC services are an economically efficient means of responding to child abuse. Communities seeking to provide child maltreatment services could leverage scarce dollars through implementing the CAC model.

Highlights from the findings of the NCAC cost-benefit study include:

- On a per-case basis, traditional investigations were 36% more expensive than CAC investigations. The average per-case cost of a CAC investigation was \$2902 compared to \$3949 for a non-CAC investigation, generating a savings of more than \$1,000 per case.

- The total annual operations budget for CAC investigations was 45% higher than that of the total annual operations cost in the non-CAC community. However, on that budget, the CAC multidisciplinary team processed 202% of the average annual investigation caseload compared to the caseload processed in the non-CAC community.
- Annual investigation costs per 1,000 children were 41% lower in the CAC community than in the non-CAC community.
- CAC style investigations result in higher perceived public benefits.
- Taxpayers in both communities placed a greater value on CAC services than on traditional investigations and valued CAC services at more than it actually costs either community to provide such services.
- In the CAC community, the return on investment was found to be \$3.32. CAC-style investigations were valued at between three and eight times the actual cost of providing the service (\$4.99 million in lower bound benefit or \$8.13 million in upper bound benefit vs. \$1.5 million in actual costs).
- In the non-CAC community, taxpayers recognized that CAC-style investigations would provide a return on investment of at least \$1.74. In fact, CAC services were valued at nearly double to almost triple the cost of the traditional services for which taxpayers were already paying (\$1.77 million in lower bound benefit or \$3.02 million in upper bound benefit vs. \$1.01 million in costs).
- Taxpayer willingness-to-pay (WTP) was used as an indicator of perceived CAC program benefit to the community. Taxpayers who identified themselves as white, young, female, with at least a high school diploma were more likely than others to endorse higher WTP values. Taxpayers reporting that they or someone close to them had been abused were willing to pay more for CAC services. Taxpayers who perceived the risk of child abuse as being higher than average within their community also tended to endorse higher WTP values.
- Although economies of scale are recognized as a factor in the determination of actual costs and realized savings, most communities using traditional investigation models would be well-served by determining whether they can provide a more effective child abuse response with a more efficient use of agency resources by switching to a CAC model.

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For more information on publications, conference presentations, or unpublished manuscripts that provide greater detail on the findings listed above please contact:

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