

listen.



Our mission is to assure that the voices of children and adolescents are heard.



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Reflections on the Role of the Children's Advocacy Center in Sexual Exploitation Investigations

CornerHouse held a series of workgroups during fall 2014 to explore the role of children's advocacy centers (CAC) in sexual exploitation investigations with a number of multidisciplinary team members (MDT) representing both governmental and non-governmental agencies. During these workgroups, participants discussed a number of issues that are controversial for many MDTs, including:

- Safety
- Mandated reporting
- Spectrum of Questioning
- Confidentiality and Information Sharing
- Addressing Prevention and Demand

Workgroup members drew on relevant research as well as their collective experience and wisdom to uncover common ground. What did participants learn about the role of the children's advocacy center in sexual exploitation investigations?

1. As a neutral party, a children's advocacy center has the power to hold both the interests of sexually exploited youth and the interests of justice at the same time.
2. A children's advocacy center can draw on that power to bring multidisciplinary team members together in service of sexually exploited youth.
3. A broad multidisciplinary team response to sexually exploited youth is well-supported by research and empirical evidence.
4. CACs may help identify youth at risk of sexual exploitation by:
 - a. providing training and community education
 - b. screening runaway youth
 - c. screening youth who are referred for other allegations.
5. A wide array of voluntary, culturally-responsive, supportive services should be available to sexually exploited youth. These services should honor the developmental needs of youth, acknowledge the youth's individual process of change, and provide opportunities for long-term relationship-building with positive adults. CACs may house some of these services or may partner with other agencies providing the services.
6. A forensic interview at a CAC with a sexually exploited youth may take place over multiple sessions toward the end of the investigation, at a point when the youth expresses their willingness to participate, in order to minimize the potential for evasiveness and maximize the youth's credibility.
7. Family services may be provided to the family of a sexually exploited youth by a CAC both before and after a forensic interview.
8. Medical services may be provided to a sexually exploited youth by a CAC both before and after a forensic interview.
9. CACs should be included in systemic, macro-level discussions about how best to serve sexually exploited youth.
10. As CAC staff become educated about the issue of sexual exploitation, they can provide leadership and opportunities for engagement on the part of MDT members.

Children's advocacy centers have an important role to play in sexual exploitation investigations. CAC staff and MDT members must be willing to invest significant time to learn about sexual exploitation of youth and its impact in their local communities. CACs must show flexibility and persistence as they refine their approach in partnership with their own MDT members, perpetually holding the best interests of youth at heart.

