



Testimony of Abbie Newman, R.N., J.D.

**Hearing before the
U.S. Senate Committee on the Budget**

Good Morning, Senator Toomey.

My name is Abbie Newman. My career started as a Registered Nurse practicing pediatrics before attending law school. I worked for almost 20 years as a successful medical malpractice defense litigator in Philadelphia before becoming the founding Executive Director of Mission Kids Child Advocacy Center (CAC) of Montgomery County in 2008, and I have served as the group's Executive Director and CEO to this day. Through Mission Kids, I have overseen the growth of the collaborative Multidisciplinary Team from a group that assembled on a sporadic basis to review cases that involved allegations of child abuse to a nationally accredited CAC. I currently serve on the newly established CAC Advisory Committee in PA, charged with awarding state funds to both established and developing CACs, and am a member of the Board of Directors of the PA Children's Trust Fund. I also served as President of the Pennsylvania Chapter of Child Advocacy Centers from 2012 to 2014, when I was elected as the first Chair of the External Affairs Committee of the State Chapter, in which position I continue today.

I want to thank Chairman Enzi, Ranking Member Sanders, and you Senator Toomey for the opportunity to testify here today on how we can continue working to help to heal and obtain justice for Pennsylvania children who have been victims of sexual predators. I say continue, because you have already shown great leadership on the issue of preventing child abuse and helping survivors of child abuse have access to all of the services they need to heal.

My CAC, Mission Kids, is an accredited member of the National Children's Alliance, which represents 777 child advocacy centers nationwide. We proudly support your Protecting Students from Sexual and Violent Predators Act, which seeks to keep child predators out of our nation's schools. Under your bill, schools that receive federal funds must conduct criminal background checks for teachers and other school employees. The bill also bans "passing the

trash”—the abhorrent practice of a school knowingly helping a child predator land a teaching job somewhere else, so that predator becomes someone else’s problem.

We also greatly appreciate your co-sponsorship of the Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act, which President Obama recently signed into law. The law gives law enforcement additional tools to find traffickers. It also increases fines and penalties on traffickers and reserves that money to fund services for trafficking victims, with the first \$2 million collected going to Child Advocacy Centers.

And we are very excited about your Fairness for Crime Victims Act, which will dramatically increase the amount of money disbursed from the Crime Victims Fund. Child Advocacy Centers are in desperate need of increased funding to be able to provide specialized services to these most vulnerable victims in a timely fashion.

The Story of Mission Kids

The creation of Mission Kids in Montgomery County was inspired by the story of a boy named Sasha.

Over 25 years ago, as a young boy, Sasha lived with 2 loving parents and his younger sister on the Main Line, not far from where we are right now. His parents did not understand how he went from a playful, outgoing child to a 7 year-old boy who put underwear over his head while holding a knife to his own throat, and trying to jump out of a moving car to kill himself. What his parents did not know was that Sasha was being brutally and repeatedly raped by his uncles, his father’s brothers, one of whom was a well-known Jewish cantor from New York. Sasha was finally able to find the words to tell his story to a therapist when he saw that his uncles were also abusing his 4 year-old sister. What became known after Sasha’s brave disclosure was that his father had been sexually abused by the same uncles when they were children. That is the nature of the crime of child abuse: it is a secretive crime; the abuser is someone close to the family, manipulative, and at times multi-generational.

To make matters even worse, the case took 10 years to traverse the justice system, forcing Sasha to relive his abuse each time he needed to tell his story. As a 17 year-old he agreed with a plea bargain just to make the cases end, so he could move on with his life.

District Attorney Risa Vetri Ferman, and Laurie O’Connor, the Director of Montgomery County Office of Children and Youth, had seen scenarios likes Sasha’s for years, over and over again. Together, with all of the police departments in Montgomery County, they decided it was time to have a Child Advocacy Center to change the stories for the lives of these most vulnerable victims. As Sasha’s mother told the DA: “What happened to my children was awful. But your system is even worse.”

The CAC Difference

Child sexual abuse is a crime of secrecy. Child abusers ‘groom’ their victims, taking months, or years, to make the child feel that increasing levels of touch are acceptable. By the time the actual abuse takes place, the child may feel that they are somehow to blame, and who will believe them if they find the courage to tell? Child abuse is very scary to a child, in more ways than the obvious horror of the abuse itself.

Without a CAC, if a child is brave enough to report abuse they are often required to retell—and thus relive—the abuse through multiple, repetitive interviews with Child Protective Services, the prosecution, police, victim services, and medical and mental health providers. The interviews often occur in locations that only magnify the trauma—such as police stations or Emergency Rooms. The questioners do not have the proper training, and inadvertently use an interrogation style instead of one that is an age appropriate and employs non-leading questions. And, too often, the child is not receiving the needed medical attention and mental health counseling along the way. The result is that the very professionals who are trying to help the child end up subjecting the child to additional trauma.

One adult survivor of child sexual abuse explained it well. This person saw an ad that we created which said: “Imagine living the worst day of your life over and over and over...” The person said that what clicked in his mind was that it was actually 2 of the worst days of his life: The day of the abuse, followed by the day of the investigation.

There is another danger to the typical approach of multiple interrogations: Multiple interviews can also plague a prosecution with slightly differing statements to be picked apart by a defense attorney. If a case reaches trial, the child often does not have the strength to tell their story again, this time in a courtroom, with a judge, 12 strangers, and the abuser present. The prosecution often falls apart, and the child and family left in a worse situation than before the disclosure.

Compare the difference for communities with a CAC like Mission Kids. The mission of a CAC is to achieve healing and justice for victims of child abuse. At a CAC, police, prosecutors, medical professionals, mental health counselors, and child advocates work together as a team to help a child at every step—from investigation through prosecution of the case, to receipt of specialized medical help and mental health counseling. The goal is to limit additional trauma to the child and ensure that the child receives needed services as quickly as possible.

At Mission Kids, and all nationally accredited Child Advocacy Centers, we make the child the focal point. All of the professionals come to the child, as opposed to making the child travel to numerous agencies separately. The child’s experience starts when they are greeted by child friendly and professional staff at the Center, which often resembles a pediatrician’s office or

after school environment. The child meets with and is then interviewed by a trained Forensic Interviewer. Forensic Interviewers are highly trained and responsible for obtaining a statement in a manner that is developmentally appropriate, using open-ended and non-leading questions that will not taint the interview. Members of the Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT), comprised of police, social workers and prosecutors, are able to observe the interview live on closed circuit TV so they get the benefits of observing the nuances and body language of a live interview while the child is spared the trauma of multiple interviews. And, in most CACs the interviews are recorded on DVD so there is no question later on as to exactly what was asked and how the question was answered.

Family Advocacy Services are begun as soon as the family arrives and a relationship of trust begins to build. While the child speaks to the Forensic Interviewer, the non-offending family members meet with the trained Family Advocate. This Advocate has been trained in the particular dynamics of child abuse, and how those dynamics affect the family. The Advocate initially makes sure that all of the families basic needs are being met, and if not, makes sure that the family is connected with the appropriated needed services. However, child sexual abuse, like in Sasha's case, knows no economic boundaries, and crosses all religions, ethnicities and zip codes. Advocacy services may need to be provided in Spanish, Korean, Chinese, or other languages, depending on the community being served.

And, many families are so overwhelmed that they can't process the need to follow up on mental health treatment for their children. Children react in different ways, and the effects of the abuse may not come out until a later time, or may not be exhibited in a way that the family understands is related to the abuse. The symptoms could be awful but not immediately relatable to the trauma, like with Sasha. Or, symptoms can be vague, like bed-wetting; or becoming more introverted, or promiscuity; a decline in grades or a need to become an over achiever. Or, symptoms may not manifest outwardly until a later life event, years after the abuse.

Without help, 30% of abused and neglected children will go on to abuse children as adults. Without the necessary intervention and support, victims of child abuse can go on to struggle with delinquency, school failure, obesity, drug and alcohol abuse, homelessness, thoughts of suicide and difficulty forming and sustaining relationships. The Center of Disease Control estimates the average lifetime cost of child abuse is \$210,012 per victim. The negative repercussions for our society cannot be ignored.

Families also need specialized counseling. The parent is often traumatized by what their child has been through and the closeness of the offender to the family. Child abusers are not strangers; over 90% of the time the abuser is someone in a close relationship to the child and family, like teachers or coaches or clergy. More than 50% of the time the abuser is a family

member. Parents may feel guilt, or not be ready to admit that the abuse actually happened, for instance if the abuser is an older child or spouse, or a parent's parent. If the parent doesn't heal they can't help their child to heal, and so the Advocate will educate the parents on the need to follow up with the therapeutic services, set up the initial appointment, and help to arrange transportation. And, of course, Advocates help the parents to fill out the forms that are necessary for reimbursement for Mental Health services.

The Advocates make sure that specialized medical referrals are made, and again, educate the parents on why those exams are so important even in non-emergent situations. The Advocates follow up with families over the life of a case if prosecution is begun, help them to navigate the legal process, and act as a liaison with other agencies to make sure that the channels of communication remain open for the benefit of all professional investigations and for the family and child. And, they provide court accompaniment and to medical exams if required.

A Record Of Success

Mission Kids has been operational for 5 years, and conducted over 2,300 forensic interviews in Montgomery County alone. Nationally, CACs provide victim services to more than 279,000 children/year. A cost-benefit analysis showed that traditional investigations cost 36% more than CAC-collaborative investigations. And, one study showed that felony prosecutions of child sexual abuse are double in a district that has a CAC vs. one that does not. Research shows that child abuse investigations handled through a CAC have a shorter length of time to disposition, better prosecution outcomes, higher rates of caregiver and child satisfaction, more referrals to mental health services, and better access to medical care. Also, anecdotally, use of this model results in more plea agreements.

More Needs To Be Done

Unfortunately, child abuse is all too common. Between 1/5 and 1/10 children will be victims of child sexual abuse before the age of 18. In 2013, ChildLine, Pennsylvania's child abuse hotline, registered 26,944 reports of suspected abuse or neglect. Pennsylvania received more reports of suspected child and student abuse in 2013 than any other year on record. 9,273, or 34%, of these reports, were sent to law enforcement for investigation. And these are just the cases we know about.

Every child abuse victim desperately needs help. But, due to funding shortfalls, that is not always possible.

In Pennsylvania, 23 counties have a CAC, and 44 do not, often due to inability to fund a CAC. Nationwide, 1,000 counties have no access to CACs. Some counties are attempting to begin a

Center like Mission Kids or use services of CACs in nearby counties, and some still have no CAC services at all.

Due to a lack of funds, even established CACs often have waiting times for services. It is often difficult even in urban locations to find enough Specialized Mental Health therapists and medical service providers. Many of the nation's CACs have one or two victims' advocates for 900 kids. It is not uncommon to hear that centers in Pennsylvania may have a wait time of 3-6 weeks for mental health services, and 2-4 weeks for non-emergency forensic interviews. The good and the bad news about the newly enacted Child Protections Services Laws in PA is that more cases of suspected abuse are being reported, which in turn puts more of a strain on the needed services of CACs. More money could be used to hire and train Forensic Interviewers and pay for the backbone of any CAC, the forensic interview. Money would be put towards additional Family/Victim Advocates to serve the increased number of children and their families in need of CAC services, and Case Coordinators to schedule the collaborative interviews of the increased reports received. More specialized mental health services and support, so crucial to healing of both victims and families, could be provided. Also, as the majority of CACs are non-profit agencies, more existing resources could be put towards programs such as outreach and prevention and support groups for survivors and families.

Fairness for Crime Victims Act

I want to thank you for your work to increase the amount of money released from the Crime Victims Fund **to benefit all victims, including victims of child abuse.**

The Crime Victims Fund receives no taxpayer dollars; instead, it is funded by fines and penalties on criminals convicted in federal court.

This year, thanks to your leadership, the Budget Resolution required Congress to release an estimated \$2.5 billion. This is over three-and-a-half times as much as the \$745 million that was released in fiscal 2014. And it will make a dramatic funding difference for Pennsylvania, which will see funds for CACs and other victim service groups more than quadruple—going from \$17 million in fiscal year 2014 to an estimated \$70 million in fiscal year 2015.

Your Fairness to Crime Victims Act, which I am proud to support, will make the increased funding stream permanent, by requiring the Crime Victims Fund to release, each year, the average of the past three years' intake.

Senator Toomey, thank you for your efforts on behalf of crime victims, and I look forward to continuing to work with you on these efforts.