

## **Adams County Children's Advocacy Center. A Place of Healing.**

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What is a children's advocacy center? The role of the children's advocacy center is to provide a child-friendly, trauma-informed environment for child forensic interviews, child and family advocacy, medical exams, mental health services and prevention and education programs. Without a children's advocacy center, the child may end up having to tell the worst story of his or her life over and over again during the investigative process to doctors or nurses, law enforcement, lawyers, therapists, investigators, judges, and others.

In our community, when police or child protective services believe a child may be experiencing abuse, the child is brought to the Adams County Children's Advocacy Center – a safe, child-focused environment. At the Center, the child tells their story once to a trained forensic interviewer who knows the right questions to ask in a way that does not re-traumatize the child. Then, a team that includes medical professionals, law enforcement, prosecution, mental health, child protective services, victim advocacy, and other professionals make decisions together about how to help the child based on the interview. This is called the multidisciplinary team (MDIT) and is a core part of the work of children's advocacy centers.

In addition to forensic interviews, the Adams County Children's Advocacy Center offers child and family advocacy, mental health services, medical exams, and prevention and education programs.

The foundation for family advocacy is to build trusting, respectful and meaningful relationships with children, teens and adults. The ACCAC's child and family advocate, specially trained in victim advocacy, conducts family-centered assessments to learn about the family members' reactions to the crises they are facing, and their strengths, coping strategies, and needs going forward. The more positive and safe the relationship feels to the children and their non-offending caregivers, the more they are likely to engage in sharing their input and concerns, and work toward positive outcomes for themselves and their family.

In the last year, the Adams County Children's Advocacy Center provided services to 225 children, 219 non-offending caregivers and 272 siblings/child family members. The specially trained ACCAC team conducted 199 forensic interviews, provided 1,143 child/family advocacy services, and provided medical exams/consults for 57 children.

Quality mental health services are critical for the long-term well-being of children who have experienced adverse experiences such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, physical or emotional neglect, witnessing domestic violence, and/or experiencing a household member addicted to illegal drugs and/or alcohol. The Adams County Children's Advocacy Center is committed to providing trauma informed, evidence-based mental health services on-site. In 2021, mental health assessments were conducted for 78 children who received a combined 703 therapy sessions. At the CAC children and parents are provided information and taught skills related to processing their trauma; managing

distressing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors; and enhancing safety, parenting skills, and family communication. Hope and healing are inspired and encouraged.

Since its inception in 2006, the Adams County Children's Advocacy Center has done meaningful work in supporting child victims of abuse but wants to do more to prevent child abuse from happening in the first place. Experts believe that when 5% of a community's adults learn about child abuse prevention, that is the "tipping point in reducing child abuse in their community. The ACCAC's education and awareness program is focused on providing parents, caregivers, professionals, and the community with knowledge about the dynamics and myths of the complex issue of child abuse as well as what to look for and how to respond if abuse is suspected. Most recently, educational groups were formed focused on educating middle school and high school girls on trauma, resiliency, and coping skills. A YouTube channel will soon be launched with educational training and information for the general public. Educational programs are held annually in local schools and will resume in the fall.

The Adams County Children's Advocacy Center is dedicated to a building a community where children are safe, families are strong and child victims can become children again.