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DURHAM, N.H. - As communities continue to search for ways to improve sexual abuse investigations, research from the University of New Hampshire's Crimes against Children Research Center finds that the Children's Advocacy Center model, a growing and innovative program, can help communities succeed in this goal.

The UNH research findings are detailed in a new report, "Evaluating Children's Advocacy Centers' Response to Child Sexual Abuse," by the Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP).

Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs) are designed to make child abuse investigations more child friendly, increase professional coordination, and improve investigation outcomes. The first CAC was developed in 1985. In 2007 more than 450 accredited CACs existed and more than 235,000 children received services at a CAC last year. UNH researchers have been studying child abuse investigations for more than eight years, examining ways to improve the quality of child abuse investigations.

"The findings from our research support the multidisciplinary approach of the CAC model," said Lisa Jones, an author of the report and researcher at the Crimes against Children Research Center (CCRC). "CACs increase communication among professionals involved with child abuse victims and focus on the needs of the child and family. They can help improve attention to gaps in service or response for these children."

UNH conducted a multi-site evaluation of Children's Advocacy Centers. Researchers collected data on investigations from 10 communities across the country and compared investigations in communities with a CAC to those without a CAC. The UNH researchers are continuing research with CACs nationally and in New Hampshire.

The key research findings include:

- Communities with CACs had greater law enforcement involvement in child sexual abuse investigations and more evidence of coordinated investigations.

- CAC cases resulted in better child access to medical exams.
- CACs documented a higher rate of referrals for child mental health treatment, although children accessed mental health treatment at similar rates across all communities.
- Caregivers at CACs expressed greater satisfaction with the investigative process.
- CACs and comparison communities had similar rates of prosecution and conviction of offenders. However, one CAC filed more criminal charges than the community it was compared with, and another sentenced offenders to longer jail terms.

"While our study and our work with CACs identify areas in which they have been successful, our research highlights other areas where CACs could strive even further to help improve the response to victims," Jones said.

Jones noted that CACs are in a good position to improve communication between professionals and families, help children access mental health services with proven effectiveness, and advocate for shortening the length of time child abuse cases languish in the criminal justice system.

New Hampshire has a statewide network of eight CACs. In 2007, New Hampshire CACs provided services to 1,375 children, a 16 percent increase over 2006. This increase reflects the rapid growth of the CAC model in New Hampshire. The average age of a child seen at a New Hampshire CAC was 9, and 90 percent of the children were alleged victims of sexual abuse.

"New Hampshire's CAC programs have benefited enormously from the wisdom of the research staff at the UNH CCRC. Not only are our local centers incorporating findings from this national study, but they have the added benefit of working closely with the research staff on CAC-related research projects in New Hampshire. In the end, the research validates what we already knew: CACs ensure greater communication across professional disciplines and provide increased access to services for our youngest victims of crime," said Amanda Peterson, state coordinator for the New Hampshire Network of Child Advocacy Centers.

For more information on the New Hampshire Network of Child Advocacy Centers, visit <http://www.nhncac.org/>.

The UNH Crimes against Children Research Center (CCRC) works to combat crimes against children by providing high-quality research and statistics to the public, policy makers, law enforcement personnel, and other child welfare practitioners. CCRC is concerned with research about the nature of crimes including child abduction, homicide, rape, assault, and physical and sexual abuse as well as their impact. Visit the center online at <http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/index.html>.

