

Newly-built Child Advocacy Center to open in September

By SHANNON MURPHY
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Officials with the St. Clair County Child Abuse/ Neglect Council expect to start using their newly constructed Child Advocacy Center in the next month.

The center on Military Street in Port Huron - which also houses the council's new headquarters - was completed at the end of June, said Executive Director Sally Straffon.

Since then, employees have been decorating the two rooms that will be used to interview children who have been sexually abused.

The rooms were decorated in bright colors with plenty of toys for children to play with while there.

Local police agencies, the county prosecutor's office and staff from the state Department of Human Services will be able to use the rooms to interview children in a safe environment.

A trained interviewer was hired by the council to conduct the talks. Local agencies will be able to watch and listen to the conversation from a separate room. They also will be able to ask questions through the interviewer, who will be wearing an earpiece connected to a microphone.

"We are here to serve the professionals who are investigating these matters," Straffon said.

Currently, most police agencies conduct interviews at police stations, which can be intimidating for children, said Port Huron police Detective Marcy Kuehn.

"We're very excited," she said. "Before we had to bring the kids here and they had to sit in the same waiting room that sex offenders have to come through to register.

"This is a very inviting, uplifting atmosphere for a child."

Child advocacy centers are not uncommon; there are about 30 of them around the state, said Nancy Szlezynsier, program director for the council. She helped research the idea of a center here and coordinated the effort.

The council does not know how many children will be interviewed at the center.

"There's a need here," Szlezynsier said. "There's no question there's an absolute need."

The center also will help at trial by reducing the number of times a child is interviewed and has to relive a painful experience, officials said.

"There's a lot of secrecy and denial in sexual abuse cases," Szlezynsier said. "This kind of facility can make that whole process less traumatic for the children and more efficient for the investigating agency."

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FRIENDLY, RELAXING ROOM: The private waiting room for families at the new Child Advocacy Center located on Military Street in Port Huron will be ready to open next month



GREAT PLANS: Marcy Kuehn, Bonnie Bracken, Malissa McBride and Nancy Szlezyngier talk about the new interview rooms Wednesday at the new St. Clair County Child Abuse/Neglect Council building.