

oppaga

Progress Report



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Children's Advocacy Centers Authorized to Receive State Funds, But Need Additional Accountability

at a glance

Since our 2002 report, the Legislature has created funding sources for children's advocacy centers. However, the Florida Network of Children's Advocacy Centers needs to take additional steps to establish a statewide accountability system.

Scope

In accordance with state law, this progress report informs the Legislature of actions taken in response to the findings and recommendations in our 2002 report on children's advocacy centers.^{1,2}

Background

Children's advocacy centers (CACs) are local entities that support the child protective investigative process. Their goals are to reduce trauma to child victims of abuse and neglect and to coordinate the various activities and agencies involved in child abuse investigations. CACs provide a neutral, child-friendly facility where all the agencies involved in investigations, such as the Department of Children and Families, Child Protection Teams, and law enforcement, may interview and examine a child. Staff from these agencies also meet regularly to discuss and make

decisions regarding investigations, treatment services, and prosecution of perpetrators.

The services provided and types of cases served by individual children's advocacy centers vary widely, based on their funding levels and community needs. Some centers provide additional services and programs, such as supervised visitation and domestic violence programs. Children's advocacy centers in Florida are primarily designed and governed at the local level. They also have governing boards that address organizational issues such as fiscal policies and public relations.

While they are locally governed, the children's advocacy centers operate under the auspices of the National Children's Alliance, the membership organization for the 512 CACs operating nationwide. The National Children's Alliance offers accredited membership for centers that meet 10 established standards, such as having a child-appropriate facility, specialized medical evaluation, and the ability to track and review cases. The alliance offers associate membership to centers that do not fulfill all of the 10 requirements. Florida's children's advocacy centers also participate in the Florida Network of Children's Advocacy Centers, Inc., the state chapter of the National Children's Alliance. Section 39.3035, *Florida Statutes*, establishes criteria for full membership in the network. These criteria are similar to those for the National Children's Alliance, with the additional requirement that the CAC be a Child Protection

¹ Section 11.51(6), *F.S.*

² *Special Review: Children's Advocacy Center Appear Beneficial But Have Limited Accountability*, OPPAGA [Report No. 02-44](#), August 2002.

Team, or incorporate the participation of a Child Protection Team by written agreement.

Children’s advocacy centers receive funding from a variety of sources, including local donations, grants from local governments, private foundations and contracts with state agencies. The National Children’s Alliance also provides opportunities for funding. This includes non-competitive grant funds for accredited members and competitive grant funds for associate members. For Fiscal Year 2004-05, the Legislature authorized two additional sources of revenue for CACs: fees from a specialty license plate and fees from court costs for cases involving crimes against children.

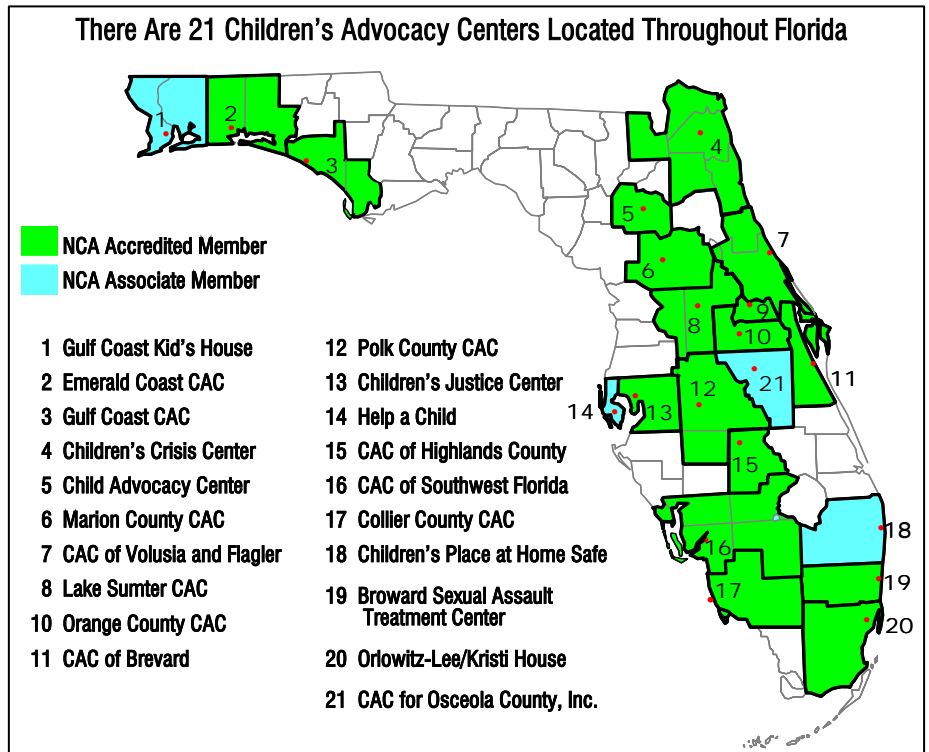
There are currently 21 CACs serving 32 of Florida’s 67 counties. Seventeen of the centers are full members of the National Children’s Alliance, and the remaining four are associate members. There are also four new centers being developed in Pasco, Hernando, Santa Rosa, and Putnam counties.

Prior Findings

We identified four funding options for legislative consideration

Our prior report addressed a legislative request to assess options for potential state funding of children’s advocacy centers. Our report assessed four options for legislative consideration.

- Discontinue any state funding for CACs.
- Provide funding to some CACs as Community Budget Request items.
- Establish a trust fund endowment that would provide funding for all CACs by creating a trust fund and providing a lump-sum “seed money” appropriation.
- Provide uniform statewide funding to all CACs that met certain criteria, either an equal level of funding to all qualifying centers or varied levels of funding based on factors such as caseload.



Children’s advocacy centers had limited statewide accountability

Our prior review determined that children’s advocacy centers lacked a comprehensive accountability system that reported their inputs, outputs, and outcomes. The centers reported some fiscal and programmatic information such as expenditures and number of clients served to their boards and other funding sources. However, this information was not standardized, and the centers had limited data on their efficiency and outcomes. The 12 children’s advocacy centers that were accredited members of the National Children’s Alliance in Fiscal Year 2002-03 maintained client information in a case tracking system and reported caseloads, client demographics, and case disposition biannually to the alliance. However, the eight Florida CACs that were associate members of the alliance at that time were not required to report this information.³ We concluded that an accountability system should be established if any future state funding for children’s advocacy centers is provided.

³ If associate members receive training or program support funds from the National Children’s Alliance, they are required to report statistical information.

The children's advocacy center statute needed correction to address technical inaccuracies

We recommended that the Legislature consider amending ss. 39.3035(1) and (3), *Florida Statutes*, to remedy technical inaccuracies regarding the membership requirements of the Florida Network of Children's Advocacy Centers, Inc. The statute identifies the network as an accrediting membership organization, but the network does not perform this function.

Current Status _____

The Legislature established additional CAC funding sources

Since Fiscal Year 2002-03, the Legislature authorized additional funding to children's advocacy centers from three sources: appropriations, fees from a specialty license plate, and fees collected from court costs.

Appropriations. In Fiscal Year 2003-04, the Legislature considered but did not approve requests from children's advocacy centers for appropriations. For Fiscal Year 2004-05, the Legislature appropriated \$250,000 to the Emerald Coast Children's Advocacy Center, but this funding was subsequently vetoed by the Governor.

Specialty License Plate. The 2003 Legislature created the Child Abuse Prevention and Intervention license plate.⁴ Annual fees from this plate are divided equally between the Children's Home Society of Florida and the Florida Network of Children's Advocacy Centers, Inc. The specialty license plate, bearing the slogan "Stop Child Abuse," is expected to bring in revenues of \$50,000 for the Florida Network of Children's Advocacy Centers, Inc., in 2004. As of May 31, 2004, the Network had received \$16,012 from sales of the plates, which will be forwarded to the Children's Home Society as reimbursement for \$30,000 in upfront production and marketing costs. The network will not retain any further funds until it has fully reimbursed the Children's Home Society.

⁴ Chapter 2003-121, *Laws of Florida*.

Court Costs. The 2004 Legislature created the Child Advocacy Trust Fund within the Department of Children and Family Services, with the specific purpose of funding children's advocacy centers.⁵ In certain cases involving crimes against children, additional court costs are collected and allocated to the trust fund. The court will impose a cost of \$101 against an offender in addition to any other cost or penalty required by law. These proceeds will then be transferred each month, less \$1 from each sum collected, and deposited into the Child Advocacy Trust Fund. The funds will then be disbursed to the Florida Network of Children's Advocacy Centers, with 10% retained by the network to match local contributions by communities and 5% retained by the board of directors to support the network office. The remaining 85% of the funds will be divided among CACs that meet the standards set forth in s. 39.3035, *Florida Statutes*.⁶

CAC accountability requirements have increased, but additional steps are needed

Although many centers are community-based and locally governed, they should be accountable to the Legislature and the state agencies involved in the investigative process for their use of state funding. The 2004 Legislature required that the Florida Network of Children's Advocacy Center's provide an annual report to the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House providing information regarding CACs that receive state funding from the Child Advocacy Trust Fund.⁷ In August of each year beginning in 2005, the children's advocacy centers are required to report the sources of revenue they receive, their expenditures, and standardized output measures. The Board of Directors of the Florida Network of Children's Advocacy Centers is currently developing the output measures the network will require its members to report.⁸ Establishing these performance standards also will help ensure that services are equitably delivered to the client.

⁵ Chapter 2004-302, *Laws of Florida*.

⁶ The collection of fees for the Child Advocacy Trust Fund began on July 1, 2004. The annual revenue projection for the trust fund is \$900,000 if a fee is collected in every possible case. However, based on the performance of a similar trust fund for the Florida Council of Sexual Violence, \$500,000 is a more reasonable estimate for the fund.

⁷ Chapter 2004-265, *Laws of Florida*.

⁸ According to the network's executive director, these requirements will be similar to the data collected by the National Children's Alliance.

Progress Report

The Florida Network of Children's Advocacy Centers is still working on a uniform state accountability system for CACs. The network has taken steps to promote accountability and formalize its operations. Since 2002, the board of directors has hired an executive director and it has established fiscal and personnel policies. The board plans to meet in October 2004 to discuss the development of accountability standards.

However, the network does not currently collect uniform information from its members. The network asks CACs to give them a copy of the information they report to the National Children's Alliance, such as caseload data, child protective services disposition, and law enforcement disposition, on a bi-annual basis. Nonetheless, some associate members of the National Children's Alliance are not required to report this information.

There are currently two barriers to collecting standardized information from all CACs. First, not all CACs have access to a data tracking system. Some centers lack the technology to track case data, and it can be difficult to manually report this information. However, the National Children's Alliance is currently developing a web-based software program, called NCAtrak that would allow CACs to track uniform information about their clients. The program will be available to all members of the NCA and is scheduled to begin launching in January 2005. A second barrier to collecting uniform data is that some CACs have different criteria for measuring costs, budgetary information, and the number of clients served.

The differing criteria can impede efforts to quantify information and compare data across CACs. The Florida Network of Children's Advocacy Centers should continue its efforts to develop accountability measures for all CACs receiving state funding and collect uniform information from its members.

Membership and funding requirements in statute not yet clarified

The Legislature has not chosen to amend s. 39.3035, *Florida Statutes*, to address technical issues regarding the membership requirements of the Florida Network of Children's Advocacy Centers, Inc.⁹ Section 39.3035, *Florida Statutes*, states that CACs must meet minimum standards and be certified by the network as being a full member in order to be eligible for state funds. The Florida Network of Children's Advocacy Centers is not an accrediting membership organization and thus cannot certify that centers meet the standards identified in this statute when distributing state funds. To clarify requirements for state funding, the Legislature should consider amending s. 39.3035, *Florida Statutes*, to reference the standards set by the National Children's Alliance and either limit funding to full members of this organization, or provide funding to both full and associate members.

⁹ Chapter 2004-302, *Laws of Florida*, provides for disbursement of Child Advocacy Trust Fund monies to the network, but was not intended to address these membership issues.

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