

# **Addressing the Gap in Multidisciplinary Cooperation on Child Sex Crime Investigations**

Michigan State Police - Houghton Lake Post

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## **Summary**

The project was titled, "Addressing the gap in multidisciplinary cooperation on child sex crime investigations". Michigan State Police (MSP) Houghton Lake Post personnel recognized a lack of communication between local officers and the staff at the new Northern Michigan Child Advocacy Center (NMCAC). The problem was identified as a priority because of its direct impact on young victims of violent crimes. The post commander made personal contact with the county prosecutor, state leaders in child advocacy, post detectives, local law enforcement leaders, and the director of the NMCAC. The goal of the project was to identify roles for all disciplines involved in crimes with child victims, create cohesion between law enforcement and the NMCAC, identify what role the NMCAC would play in the community, and to ensure all appropriate resources were utilized to protect child victims. Clear communication between leaders was found to be the catalyst for cohesion. Law enforcement leaders committed to supporting the efforts of the NMCAC while the NMCAC dedicated itself to achieving national accreditation. The project resulted in the NMCAC developing a clear role in helping child victims of crime through partnerships with law enforcement, and thus, the NMCAC is now utilized more by law enforcement as its credibility has been established and supported by law enforcement leaders. Multidisciplinary teams are used for accountability. Child victims are treated with the utmost compassion and care as the multidisciplinary team seeks to bring them support, comfort, and justice.

## **Description: Scanning**

During the scanning phase of the project, multiple issues were identified as problems between the NMCAC and law enforcement.

- The county did not have a clearly articulated multidisciplinary team or plan for addressing the investigation of crimes against children. This problem was identified as a critical issue due to its impact on child victims in very serious criminal cases.
- The NMCAC was a newly formed child advocacy center without a clear role in the local law enforcement community.
- The NMCAC lacked funding. The director was under the impression the center could simply bill local police agencies for each interview. However, this was not a viable option.
- The NMCAC, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the Prosecutor's Office, and local police departments all had different methods for conducting forensic interviews of child victims.
- At the initial level of diagnosis, some law enforcement agencies were pushing for a mandated use of the NMCAC, and others were pushing for a complete avoidance of the NMCAC by utilizing in-house interviewers.

### **Description: Analysis**

During the analysis phase of the project, the MSP post commander discovered many details about the nature of the problem.

- A survey of the troopers revealed the vast majority of post personnel did not utilize the NMCAC for any child victim interviews, did not know about the existence of the NMCAC, and/or were unsure of its accreditation and validity.
- Interviews with detectives and sergeants at the post identified the current course of action to deal with the problem was to have forensically trained troopers conduct their own interviews.
- A large amount of confusion and lack of communication was discovered between DHHS, law enforcement, and the staff of the NMCAC.
- The post commander contacted other advocacy centers in the area to discover that the NMCAC had been established without the knowledge of surrounding advocacy centers. This caused confusion in the greater law enforcement community in regards to advocacy center resources.
- The post commander met with local law enforcement and discovered that most of the leadership had not dealt with advocacy centers in the past. He also discovered the law enforcement members on the NMCAC board were open about their inexperience and lack of expertise in this area.

### **Description: Response**

During the response phase of the project, the post commander took very intentional steps to address the specific problems identified.

- The post commander met with the director of the NMCAC, the undersheriff, and the post detective to set a goal for the project. It was decided the agencies would work together to establish a multidisciplinary approach to forensic interviews of child victims. A complimentary goal was also established to have every police agency utilizing the NMCAC in 2016 after the center received accreditation.
- Alternatives were not an option. All stakeholders agreed that it was a necessity for the project to succeed for the sake of the child victims and the validity of their investigations.
- The post commander met with the board of directors for the NMCAC and offered his support, assistance, and experience as a former member of two child advocacy center boards.
- The post commander volunteered to serve on the hiring panel for new employees at the NMCAC.
- The NMCAC staff established excellent communication with all stakeholders, and moved forward with facility improvements, staff enhancements, and accreditation.
- The prosecutor, post commander, undersheriff, Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) leadership, and the director of the NMCAC agreed upon a written multidisciplinary approach for crimes in Roscommon County with child victims.
- Some law enforcement agencies sought funding to pay a yearly support fee to the NMCAC. Other agencies dedicated themselves to the support of fundraisers for the NMCAC to offset forensic interview costs.

- It was clear to everyone involved that open communication and face-to-face meetings facilitated honest dialogue. This honest dialogue clarified the needs and abilities of all parties involved. Each discipline learned what the others could do within the scope of their training and protocols. This removed feelings of frustration when certain agencies were perceived as not being willing to commit to certain tasks.

### **Description: Assessment**

During the assessment phase it was discovered that all goals had been achieved.

- The direct impact of the project was a collaborative multidisciplinary approach to crimes with child victims.
- DHHS employees, law enforcement officers, the prosecutor, and NMCAC staff members are now notified immediately upon the initiation of a criminal investigation with a child victim. They then coordinate their responses in order to limit child forensic interviews, and ensure full cooperation between agencies.
- A multidisciplinary team including DHHS employees, the Prosecutor's Office, law enforcement detectives, and NMCAC staff meets on a regular basis to review cases, reports, and interviews. Honest feedback ensures high standards are maintained, and communication is occurring at all levels.
- The post commander served on a NMCAC hiring panel for a new forensic interviewer.
- The post has conducted multiple fundraisers to support the NMCAC, including a community "hot dog roast" and a raffle through a local law enforcement motorcycle group.
- Prior to this project, the NMCAC was not being used for any child forensic interviews. The NMCAC was utilized by the Houghton Lake Post only 19 times 2015. A review of current statistics revealed the use of the NMCAC 22 times in the first quarter of 2016.
- The primary goals were met. However, a secondary impact of this joint effort was the improvement of multidisciplinary relations in Roscommon County and a better understanding of each agency's roles and policies. Most importantly, child victims are better cared for with this improved team system.

### **Key Project Team Members:**

- F/Lt. Josh Lator, Michigan State Police
- D/Sgt. Rick Sekely, Michigan State Police
- Undersheriff Ben Lowe, Roscommon County Sheriff's Department
- NMCAC Director Becky Yuncker, Northern Michigan Child Advocacy Center

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