

Caregiver Handbook

A Guide to Helping You & Your Child



**Western PA CARES for Kids
Child Advocacy Center**

**Serving Children and Families in
Jefferson, Clarion, & Forest Counties**

(814) 849-1904

Dear Parent/Caregiver:

It is our hope that you will gain some knowledge and understanding from the information we have included in this handbook. Your child is here at the center due to concerns of possible abuse. Western PA CARES for Kids (CARES) is a child-friendly place for your child to be interviewed and is an environment that encourages healing. The district attorney's office, law enforcement, Children and Youth caseworkers, family advocates, nurses, and our staff work together as a multi-disciplinary team (MDT) to investigate allegations of abuse and to provide help and support.

CARES offers support for you and your family to find and receive additional services. Our goal is to make this process as easy as possible. Our Family Advocate will work with you to help identify additional needs your family may have and help connect you with the providers of those services or provide you with the referral information. Please contact the family advocate at 814-849-0180 if you have questions prior to coming to the center.

Sincerely,

Staff of Western PA CARES for Kids

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A safe place for children

Every year there are over 40,000 cases of child abuse reported in Pennsylvania. Child abuse can cause serious physical and emotional injury for the child. Non-offending caregivers, siblings, and other family members could also suffer emotional pain when a child becomes a victim of abuse.

Western PA CARES for Kids (CARES) is one of over 700 Child Advocacy Centers nationwide. Our main focus is the well-being of the child victim and their family. Our center is designed to help children and their families begin to heal from the trauma of abuse and provides a safe environment where the healing can begin.





Our Mission

CARES provides a comprehensive, multidisciplinary team response to allegation of abuse in a child-friendly setting in order to achieve a coordinated team approach to child abuse investigations and interventions. CARES provides a neutral, fact finding forensic interview which is coordinated to avoid repetitive interviewing of the child. CARES also provides head to toe medical evaluations through specially trained nurses, in order to answer concerns of the child and their non-offending caregivers.

Victim's Rights

As a victim of crime in Pennsylvania you have the following rights:

You have the right to be told...

- about services available to you in your county
- about certain court events, including information on bail, escape of offender, release of an offender
- about the details of the final disposition of a case

You have the right to receive...

- notice of the arrest of the offender
- information about restitution and assistance with compensation
- accompaniment to all criminal proceedings by a family member, a victim advocate or a support person

You have the right to provide input...

- into the sentencing decision and to receive help in preparing an oral and/or written victim impact statement
- into post sentencing decisions



The above information was provided by www.pacrimevictims.com.

For more information about your rights as a victim of crime in Pennsylvania, and for additional assistance, contact your local Victim/Witness Coordinator based in your District Attorney's Office.

YOUR TEAM OF PROFESSIONALS

Children and Youth Services (CYS) is responsible for the protection of children. The role of the CYS caseworker is to help protect children by providing services and support to resist conditions that are harmful to children. Caseworkers also work with the child's caregiver to develop a safety plan to help protect the child.

Law Enforcement Officials are responsible for investigating reports of crime and for determining whether a crime has been committed. They may ask questions to children, non-offending family members, suspects and other witnesses, and gather evidence from the scene of an alleged incident.

The District Attorney's Office is responsible for assessing the case for prosecution, approving the filing of charges, and prosecuting cases of child abuse. Consideration is given to many factors including the age and maturity of the child, the child's ability to testify, whether the suspect has confessed, presence of or absence of medical evidence and the availability of witnesses. The prosecutor has the final decision as to whether charges will be filed.

Forensic Interviewers are specially trained to interview children. They conduct non-leading, age and developmentally appropriate interviews using open ended questions.

Family Advocates provide information regarding the interview and medical evaluation process and answer questions you may have about the process or child abuse in general. They also work to connect non-offending caregivers and family members with additional services in the community. The Family Advocate provides on-going support and up-to-date information. You may be asked to sign a "Release of Information" form so that we can offer pertinent resources regarding your child's case as needed.

Medical Evaluations are a non-invasive head to toe medical exam provided to all children who come to the center for services at no charge. A specially trained nurse examiner (SANE) provides this service on site at the center. The family advocate accompanies the child during the exam. The primary purpose of the

medical evaluation is to ensure the physical and psychological well-being of the child.

Mental health therapists offer trauma-focused treatment to children and their families who become involved with the child advocacy center. The family advocate provides referrals to therapists who use these evidence based practices for trauma.



Working Together

Everyone that you encounter at Western PA CARES for Kids will work to ensure that this process is sensitive to your family's needs in order to best assist your family.

CARES accomplishes this by providing the following

- A safe, child friendly place for young victims and/or witnesses, non-offending family members and/or caregivers during the investigation of child sexual and physical abuse and those children who have witnessed crimes.
- A collaborative team investigation that reduces the number of interviews a child victim is subjected to during the initial investigative period.
- Referrals for child specific therapeutic services designed to reduce the trauma associated with the physical and emotional pain associated with the abuse experience.
- Coordination of prosecutor, law enforcement, social service and medical professionals specifically trained to support and protect children throughout the legal process and beyond.
- Compassionate medical professionals providing medical evaluation services for child victims and their families.

Working with the system

Our system is responsible for protecting children and holding offenders accountable for their crimes against children. The more information and cooperation you are able to provide the team with, the better.

Here are some basic tips to work with the system:

- Be calm and reassuring to your child. Let your child know that it is okay to tell the truth, but do not coach your child on what to say. It is important for their story to be told in their own words and in his or her own time.
- When you are asked for information, try to give as many facts and details as you can. If you don't know the answer to a question, do not try to guess. It is much better to say "I don't know."
- Cases are built on four W's: who, what, when, and where. Investigators may ask personal questions about your life. They ask personal questions because any information that you share with them may help the investigation.

What is a Forensic Interview?

When child abuse is suspected, it is important to determine whether or not abuse has occurred. Most child abuse investigations require an interview with the child.

When there has been a ChildLine report provided to CYS and law enforcement, they contact CARES to get an interview scheduled. Whatever agency called to request the interview then calls the non-offending caregiver to schedule the interview with the family. CARES then notifies the multi-disciplinary team of the date and time of the interview.

The team and child and guardian all come to the center for the interview. A specially trained forensic interviewer provides child-friendly interviews by asking non-leading, open ended and developmentally appropriate questions. The child speaks with the interviewer while the team members observe via closed-circuit TV in an adjacent room.

A forensic interview at CARES:

- Minimizes the number of times a child has to tell their story.
- Reduces the number of people who directly interview the child

- Allows the parent/caregiver to understand who the multi-disciplinary team includes and provides an opportunity to ask questions.
- Provides a means of determining and coordinating needs and services for the child and their family

Team members will work together to keep you informed about the investigation and the status of your child's case. CARES is always available to talk with you and assist you in obtaining services.

Taking care of your child and yourself

Physical and sexual abuse are scary and uncomfortable for many children to talk about for numerous reasons.

Children are often confused, fearful, or embarrassed and often feel that telling will make people angry at them. Be careful not to question your child too much. Let your child know that it is okay to talk when he or she feels ready, and that you will be there to listen. Experiencing abuse often changes the way your child thinks, feels, and acts. You may notice changes in your child's behavior and they may begin to act out at school or at home.

It is beneficial to set up mental health counseling services for your child. Counseling services act as an additional support for you and your child and may provide help with behavioral and emotional changes.

Caregivers, siblings, and other members of the family may also have different reactions and feelings when there is a disclosure of abuse. The stress of the entire situation may be overwhelming and confusing, and you may feel like you are being pulled into many different directions. Taking time for yourself is important, and in fact may help with your ability to handle the stress.

Remember in order to take good care of someone else, you must take good care of yourself.

Our Family Advocate can provide you with referrals to specialized counselors who work with children that have experienced abuse. We can also provide counseling referrals for you, other caregivers, and siblings who have been affected by the situation. With additional support in place, your child and your family can begin to the healing process. These services may also be covered under Pennsylvania's Crime Victims Compensation. The Family Advocate can give you more information regarding this.



Stay in touch with us

Contact your team of professionals with information about any changes in your life, such as moving, contact from the offender, or any other information that may affect the investigation. If you are unable to contact the investigators, contact your Family Advocate at 814-849-0180.

Important Information

Interview

Date: ___/___/___

Time: _____

Medical Exam

Date: ___/___/___

Time: _____

Law Enforcement Investigator

Name: _____

Agency: _____

Phone: _____

Children and Youth

Caseworker: _____

Agency: _____

Phone: _____

Family Advocate

Advocate: _____

Agency: _____

Phone: _____

County Detective – D.A. Office

Name: _____

Agency: _____

Phone: _____

Therapist

Name: _____

Agency: _____

Phone: _____

