



TO: Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice & Public Safety
FROM: Nila Grahl, Southeast Region Manager, Racine, Kenosha & Walworth Child Advocacy Centers, Children's Wisconsin
DATE: Thursday, February 8, 2024
RE: Support for AB 940 – Funding for victim services, including grants to child advocacy centers

Chair Spiros and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to share testimony with you today. My name is Nila Grahl and I lead Children's Wisconsin's (Children's) child advocacy centers in Racine, Kenosha and Walworth Counties. I'm here today to share Children's strong support for this bipartisan legislation. We want to thank the bill authors Senators James and Agard, along with Representatives Snyder and Conley, for their work on this proposal, as well as several other members of this committee for cosponsoring this legislation.

Children's is the region's only independent health care system dedicated solely to the health and well-being of kids. Between our hospitals in Milwaukee and Neenah, primary, specialty and urgent care clinics and community services offices across the state – we provide kids and their families with care and services they need to promote health, safety and well-being. While today my remarks will center on care and services we provide to children who have suffered abuse, assault, neglect and trauma, I do want the committee to know that Children's also offers several prevention-focused programs and services across the state, working upstream to help support parents with education and resources, provide child abuse awareness and education for the community, and so much more.

When we think of agencies serving victims of crime, child advocacy centers (CACs) are often hidden gems in communities across the state, serving our youngest and most vulnerable victims. CACs provide unique services including forensic interviews, medical evaluations and advocacy support. When a child has made a disclosure of abuse and an investigation begins, more often than not that child is brought to a CAC. Forensic interviewers provide children with a safe space to tell their story by asking non-leading, unbiased questions that meet forensic standards. This interview is recorded and observed in real time by sensitive crime detectives, assistant district attorneys and Child Protective Service workers. Often this recorded interview is used in court, sometimes years after the alleged abuse took place, leading to critical convictions, ensuring the child victim is protected from further harm. Advocates in the CAC are also there to answer questions, offer guidance about next steps and provide referrals for ongoing care, counseling and other supports the child and family may require.

The CAC team works together to ensure that the evaluation of an abuse allegation minimizes the re-traumatization of a child. We collaborate closely with law enforcement and Child Protective Services to ensure, as often as possible, that a child only has to be seen and tell their story once during the investigation. Our work helps to start the healing process for children and their caregivers. A CAC's mission is to promote and foster safety, healing and justice for children and families. Without effective therapeutic intervention, many children who have experienced trauma may suffer ongoing or long-term adverse social, emotional, developmental and health outcomes.

In those communities that have a CAC with medical services, like the CACs I am honored to oversee with Children's Wisconsin, trained medical providers will complete comprehensive, developmentally-sensitive, trauma-informed medical evaluations and care for children who are suspected of being abused. These specially trained physicians, nurse practitioners and social workers provide consultations when there are concerns for

child abuse, neglect, sexual abuse/assault and sex trafficking. Consultations to the Child Advocacy team may consist of a range of responses appropriate to the concerns, such as phone advice, review of records or images, or a comprehensive in-person evaluation. Our multidisciplinary team provides diagnostic assessments and treatment recommendations. When appropriate, we offer assistance and guidance to children and caregivers in understanding the medical and social issues that have prompted their involvement in an investigation of suspected child maltreatment.

In 2022, nearly 6,400 kids were cared for throughout the state at Children's CACs, medical satellite locations and through our hospital-based child advocacy service. Children's is one of a number of organizations providing child advocacy services across our state. Altogether, thousands of children and their families rely on us to be there to care for and support them during this most sensitive time.

Importantly, CACs provide services to kids and their families without charge and irrespective of insurance coverage. Most of our services are not reimbursable and families going through this most challenging time should not have to face additional financial hardship to seek the care their children need and deserve. These costs are not covered by any other municipal or law enforcement agency.

The federal Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) grant is one of the funding mechanisms the state uses to support organizations across Wisconsin that provide direct services to victims of violent crime including conducting forensic interviews, safety planning, community service referrals, counseling, crisis intervention and advocacy. VOCA is funded through fines paid by federal prosecutions and distributed via a funding formula to states. The Wisconsin Department of Justice, Office of Crime Victim Services passes VOCA funds through to nonprofit and government victim service agencies across the state via a competitive grant application process, including Children's Wisconsin's child advocacy centers. As a result of decreased federal fines due to an increase in deferred prosecution agreements, Wisconsin and states across the nation are anticipating a significant reduction in VOCA funding effective on October 1, 2024.

The decrease in VOCA funds will leave programs like ours without the necessary funds to continue offering the comprehensive care we do today. For six of Children's seven CACs, more than 50% of our funding comes from VOCA. These funds support essential personnel including victim advocates, mental health professionals, forensic interviewers and social workers. Across our 7 CACs, VOCA funds support 8 behavioral health clinicians, 9 forensic interviewers and 13 advocates and social workers. Our CACs are facing a minimum 55% reduction in VOCA funds this year which will result in catastrophic cuts to victim services, significantly impact our ability to provide comprehensive care for kids across the state. This could mean fewer forensic interviews which support child safety and sound prosecution decisions fostering more just outcomes, reduced access to mental and behavioral health care resources, fewer advocates to help families navigate their healing journey and reduced social worker support.

I'd like to share one example of a child seen at a Children's Wisconsin CAC recently. Our dedicated staff came in as they do each morning preparing for the kids and caregivers they would serve that day. These aren't just appointments on our schedule but young children and teens coming to us often at the moment of their greatest vulnerability. On this morning, we received a call from law enforcement asking to put a hold on our schedule for interviews and medical evaluations as they were gathering information quickly regarding reports of sexual abuse involving a 5- and 7-year-old.

When the children arrived at the CAC, we learned that the 7-year-old had gotten sick in the car on his way to the CAC and the 5-year-old had sensory needs. Our CAC team jumped into action doing what they do best to meet the physical and emotional needs of each child so they could participate in a forensic interview and medical evaluation. During the forensic interview, the 7-year-old was able to provide details and information to solidify the execution of an arrest warrant. Injuries were documented during the medical evaluation and

each child's health care needs were addressed compassionately, including next steps for follow-up care and connections with a mental health clinician integrated in our services at the CAC. These children were at our CAC for most of the day as multi-disciplinary team partners worked the investigation and identified a relative caregiver to care for the children. Several months later, our forensic interviewer and medical provider were both available to testify in court as fact and expert witnesses.

Our CACs are supported with some philanthropic gifts as well as direct financial support from Children's Wisconsin; last year, Children's invested more than \$1.5 million to support the work of our CACs. The coming reduction in VOCA funds will leave a significant gap in program budgets. This reduction in funds hits CACs especially hard since VOCA is one of the only federal grant sources they qualify to apply for to receive funds for direct services to victims. If you have seen how one CAC is funded, you have only seen how one CAC is funded. The CACs cobble together funding largely from VOCA dollars, some philanthropic dollars and local funding sources and the \$17,000 each receives in annual state funding. More sustainable funding is needed to support this vital service for victims of abuse. This bill will provide funds and allow for increased state support for direct services to care for vulnerable children and teens. This bill will help provide the financial stability to keep these critical services intact and enable us to continue to provide comprehensive services to kids and families with our small and dedicated teams.

Finally, I'd like to close by sharing a perspective of the unexpected but immeasurable value of our CACs and staff from a local District Attorney's office. This was sent to our forensic interviewer just yesterday and I was given permission to share today:

"I know you thought you were in court yesterday for expert testimony but it ended up being so much more. I noticed that one of the victims' adult family members was quietly crying during your testimony and I asked if he was ok and if he wanted to go in the hall. He said he was ok and that he wanted to stay and listen. When you were done testifying I checked in on him. He disclosed that he was a victim of abuse as a child and had tried to tell his mother but she didn't believe him. He shared that hearing you testify validated his experiences, thoughts, and feelings about what happened to him and he no longer feels alone and realizes just how often this happens to children like him. His abuse is something he has pushed deep down for many years. Hearing about the dynamics of abuse that you testified to has tremendously helped him understand and validate his experience. So- I wanted to thank you so much for what you do and let you know how you impacted a man's life in such a positive way."

AB 940 represents a lifeline, not only for CACs and the kids and families we serve, but also for the many other domestic violence and sexual assault support organizations across our state who rely on VOCA funds as well. This funding will support programs like ours in keeping staff and services available and accessible for those in our community facing adversity and abuse. On behalf of Children's Wisconsin, I encourage your support of this legislation. Thank you for your consideration and I am happy to answer questions now or in the future.

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