

A new place for children to feel safe

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COURTHOUSE - Victims of child abuse and child neglect will find a more kid-friendly law enforcement community in the next year, thanks in part to the Montgomery County commissioners.

The county commissioners Wednesday agreed to lease an old, dilapidated, vacant farm house on the grounds of the Norristown Farm Park for a nominal \$1-a-year fee to the nonprofit Mission Kids for use as a child advocacy center.

The center will be used for multi-disciplinary team investigations of child abuse and child neglect cases, according to county First Assistant District Attorney Risa Vetri Ferman.

“Simply not being in an office building in the middle of Norristown, not being in a police station, not being in a place where kids are afraid to come, this really was the perfect place,” said Ferman, one of the Mission Kids co-founders.

The idea behind the center is to offer a kid-friendly atmosphere while reducing the additional trauma of multiple investigations on the already traumatized young victim.

For example, it is not unusual for a victim of child abuse to undergo questioning by medical personnel, child protection workers, police and prosecutors, with the interviews taking place at a hospital, police station, the county’s Office of Children and Youth and the district attorney’s office.

At the center, one professional trained in the needs of all these entities would handle the questioning of the child.

Ferman said there are about 300 child abuse victims in the county each year.

The building also will serve as a learning and education center for all those involved in the investigation and prosecution of child abuse and child neglect cases.

Describing the creation of the center as a “true community collaborative” project, Ferman said that The Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC) of Southeast Pennsylvania has agreed to raise funds and provide the work for the \$300,000 to \$700,000 for renovations to the farmhouse.

Also, said Ferman, ABC has committed to maintaining the building through continued fundraising and the volunteers of its membership.

Ferman said she anticipates that the center will be operational by January 2009.

In addition, it is unlikely that county dollars will be sought for the organization's operating expenses.

The group has numerous fundraising efforts in the works including being the designated charity this year of the East Norriton Christmas Parade. Also, various grants are being sought.

Members of the county's district attorney's office, the police chiefs association and the county Office of Children and Youth have worked together for almost three years in an effort to make the center a reality.

Already, the organization provides joint training programs.

The group has been working with the University of Pennsylvania's Field Center for Children's Policy, Practice and Research to develop and establish a "cutting edge" child advocacy center, added Ferman.

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