

Mission Possible

KEITH PHUCAS
Times Herald Staff

Thursday, October 8, 2009



COURTHOUSE - The long-envisioned Mission Kids child advocacy center has found a place to call home.

The first-of-its-kind facility in Montgomery County, championed by District Attorney Risa Vetri Ferman, held its grand opening Wednesday at an office in East Norriton. The nonprofit group has operated there since mid-September after plans to renovate a local farmhouse fell through.

The Mission Kids's™ new office, which is about 2,000 square ft., includes a lobby, a kitchen, a reception area, an office for executive director Abbie Newman, a second office for forensic interviewers, two child-friendly interview rooms, as well as observation and conference rooms.

Envisioned as a primary location to help abused children through the court system, the project grew out of a pro bono legal counseling initiative in the 1990s. The project gained momentum in 2006 with team training for professionals who deal with abused children.

The program will draw on the expertise of medical professionals, law enforcement, social workers and prosecuting attorneys to aid victims and their families. According to a 2008 report from the Montgomery County Office of Children and Youth, there were 710 children protective service investigations of child abuse and neglect in the county last year.

A \$25,000 grant from the North Penn Foundation Community Health Foundation funded The Field Center for Children's™ Policy Practice and Research's™ feasibility study that recommended a child advocacy center for the county.

A business plan identified Mission Kids's™ program goals and objectives, performed a market and competitive analysis, marketing plan, resource needs and a financial projection, according to the nonprofit's™ Web site. Last year, the organization was granted Associate Status from the National Children's™ Alliance.

After the nonprofit was established in 2007, Mission Kids set its sights on renovating an old farmhouse at Norristown Farm Park. The group planned to lease the house for \$1 from the state but ran into obstacles and had to look elsewhere.

"The bottom line was, as much as we loved the farmhouse location, there were many developments outside our control," Ferman said. "We had to fish or cut bait."

A major concern with the farm park residence was a lease provision that could evict the center's™ operation with 30 days'™ notice. That could jeopardize money the organization raised and undermine the enterprise.

"That wasn't a chance we could take," she said. "You can't expect people to give you money when the place could disappear in 30 days."

Ferman and the group's™ board believed their mission was too vital to be at the mercy of bureaucratic snags or contractual quirks.

"We made a decision that it was far more important to get the center opened for the kids," she said.

Currently, suspected abuse victims must undergo numerous lengthy interviews with law enforcement officers, counselors and attorneys to build a criminal case; this can cause a child to relive a traumatic experience. The advocacy center streamlines this process by accommodating various professionals with a single interview, according to Mission Kids.

Eventually, Hamp Randolph, an executive with Franklin Realty Development Corp., offered the nonprofit office space at the East Norriton location rent-free for two years. Eventually, the group will likely move to a permanent site, the DA said.

The organization has a partnership with Children's™ Hospital of Philadelphia, which opened a center in King of Prussia Wednesday, where suspected abuse victims can undergo medical examinations.

Those wishing to contribute to Mission Kids can contact executive director Abbie Newman at 484-687-2990, or visit www.missionkidscac.org and donate online.

URL: <http://www.timesherald.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20091008/NEWS01/310089987&template=printart>

© 2013 The Times Herald (<http://www.timesherald.com>), Serving Montgomery County, PA.