

WOMEN AID

CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION MONTH

Local Initiatives
Streamlining a
Multi-Agency
Response

by Libby Carty McNamee



Along with the arrival of April showers, the month of April marks National Child Abuse Prevention Month. Each April the local nonprofit Greater Richmond SCAN (Stop Child Abuse Now) launches a massive public awareness campaign, distributing 30,000 blue ribbons and educational handouts throughout the community while still providing child abuse prevention and treatment services for the metro Richmond area.

This year SCAN will launch an innovative program called FAM at FAMRichmond.org. FAM will provide a central clearinghouse for local parenting information, upcoming educational opportunities, and links to other helpful Web sites. The site will serve as "parenting central" for fathers and mothers, friends and mentors, and everyday families. "Our goal is to make existing services more accessible to parents so they have the tools to raise happy and healthy children. Through this campaign we hope to normalize the process for all parents looking for help and reduce any stigma associated with it," says SCAN's Executive Director Jeanine Harper.

A vital part of the FAM initiative will include a help line, 1-800-CHILDREN, available to any and all parents seeking advice. Provided by Prevent Child Abuse Virginia (PCAV), the line will be open 24 hours a day with experts fielding calls. Johanna Schuchert, Executive Director of PCAV, explains, "Parenting is hard, but asking for help should be easy. We want to reach out to those parents thinking, 'I wish I had someone to call right now.'" She chuckles to herself as she recounts, "The father of a three-week-old baby recently grumbled to me, 'You get more directions when you buy a car!' And you know what? He's right! We want to help with that." Ms. Schuchert continues, "We realize now that child abuse stems from a combination of a lack of emotional support, parenting information and experience. By promoting positive parenting, we can help families avoid situations that may lead to abuse and neglect."

As another vital facet of FAM, SCAN will also offer a parenting support group, Circle of Parents. This weekly program will be geared to low-risk families to cultivate a free exchange of ideas, information and resources. Led by the actual parents and caregivers, Circle of Parents will strive to provide a welcoming environment for an open discussion about the challenges of raising children.

Richmond's network of child abuse prevention professionals shows teamwork at its finest. SCAN's Child Advocacy Center (CAC) provides a central facility to streamline their multidisciplinary efforts. Now every child enters the system there

rather than trickling in through various agencies. Once at the CAC, one forensic interviewer conducts a single comprehensive interview that is videotaped for the rest of the various professionals to view, including VCU Medical Center's Child Protective Team, the Department of Social Services, and Richmond law enforcement. Gone are the days when a child victim had to retell his/her story over and over to a new person every time. In addition, the child meets with investigators at the CAC and receives his/her medical examination there. Last but not least, SCAN provides mental health services at the CAC from the outset to both the child and the non-offending parent to provide emotional support.

"Everyone brings something worthwhile to the table," notes Dr. Robin Foster, Director of the Child Protective Team, which treats roughly 850 children per year. "Although the learning curve remains steep, professionals today are much better educated about detecting the patterns of unhealthy behavior leading to child abuse."

In another effective initiative, the Virginia Bar Association Young Lawyers Division teamed up with the Office of the Attorney General to create a video, the first of its kind in Virginia. Entitled *Protecting Children: A Mandated Reporter's Guide to Recognizing and Reporting Child Abuse & Neglect*, the video targets the thousands of people across the state who are required to report child abuse, providing guidance on detecting behavioral warning signs of abuse as well as on navigating the reporting process.

In conjunction with the Department of Social Services and PCAV, Theatre IV puts on up to 159 performances of the award-winning play *Hugs and Kisses*. With the goal of teaching elementary school children how to keep safe from sexual abuse, the play reaches over 50,000 students each year. Performances result in an average of two to three disclosures each.

The widespread efforts across Richmond to prevent child abuse allow us to hope that all of our children will have the chance to blossom into May flowers.

For further information, call 804-257-7226 or visit grscan.com. **V**

V Libby Carty McNamee is a local freelance writer, proud to wear a blue ribbon and indebted to those who have taken, and continue to take, strides to prevent child abuse.