



The History of WVCAN

Recently, the West Virginia Child Advocacy Network celebrated its 10-Year Anniversary. Over the past decade, more than 20,000 children have walked through the doors of a child advocacy center (CAC) in our state because someone was concerned about them – or because they had disclosed abuse themselves. Because of the work of West Virginia CACs, 20,000 precious, important lives share renewed potential, hope and promise.

The Beginning

All movements start somewhere: a place. And that place becomes important to the narrative of the movement. The first child advocacy center in West Virginia was in Hinton, WV, at REACHH. Peggy Rossi had been a leader in her community, and she worked hard to meet the needs she saw. But there was one need she saw that wasn't being met: children who made an outcry of abuse needed a better response. They were getting passed around the system, interviewed time after time after time. And they needed an advocate – someone to walk with them through the process. So she opened the first child advocacy center in West Virginia. And in November of 1999, REACHH became the first National Children's Alliance (NCA) Associate Member in the state.

But Peggy wasn't alone. There were other men and women in the Southern part of the state who had the same concerns and a similar vision: we could create a better response for children. No matter what happened in the criminal justice system or the child protection system, it mattered that someone was focusing on the needs of the child and doing their best to give them a chance at hope and healing. In the early 2000's, these individuals began to meet in the region to learn from one another and to support one another in the hard work of program development and team building. Then word spread that there were folks in Wheeling and Martinsburg that were working on developing child advocacy centers, too.

With the West Virginia Legislature's mandate that child abuse investigations be approached using the Multidisciplinary Investigative Team (MDIT) method, a clear need for coordination and standardization of programs statewide was indicated.

In 2001, for the counties in Region IV of the Department of Health and Human Resources, a series of meetings began, which included those people and organizations interested in developing CACs, and the Southeast Region CAC group was formed. In April 2002, a MDIT meeting, spawned by this group, was held in the state capitol with NCA staff to discuss expansion of CACs in the state. Professionals brought expertise from state agencies and turned their passion to the movement to grow CACs in their own communities. At this point, there were nine CACs in the development stage, five of whom were NCA Associate Members. The Southeast Region CACs collaboratively sponsored a MDIT Building Training with NCA.

The Southeast Regional group began formalizing the mission and goals of this newly-formed team, expanding the network throughout West Virginia. The group then began meeting bi-monthly with members from the entire state, and in February 2003 the West Virginia Child Advocacy Network (WVCAN) was born. Its mission is to support the development, growth and continuation of CACs using multidisciplinary teams, so that West Virginia communities can better serve children and families when concerns of child abuse arise.

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Becoming WVCAN

WVCAN began obtaining small grants from various funding sources, which were used to further its mission. In 2006 officers were elected, By-laws and Articles of Incorporation were completed, and two CACs were accredited by NCA. The group also passed its first legislative agenda, which defined child advocacy centers in the WV Code using the 10 NCA Standards for Accreditation, made CACs a mandatory member of Multidisciplinary Investigative Teams (MDIT), and an invited member of Multidisciplinary Treatment Teams in cases where the child has received CAC services.

In late 2007, it was time to secure state funding (to the tune of \$1 million). WVCAN marched to the state capitol to lobby support and find allies. Ultimately, the coalition of supporters convinced the powers that be that CACs were an absolute must. Both the House and the Senate added a \$1 million line that would flow through the Division of Justice and Community Services to support the work of CACs statewide. WVCAN waited to exhale while Governor Manchin wrote his approval message and signed the budget into law, which kept the money at the \$1 million amount the Legislature had appropriated.

In the Spring of 2007, WVCAN received its second Southern Regional CAC training grant. The state's first Forensic Interviewing Peer Review was hosted by Child and Youth Advocacy Center in Greenbrier County and WVCAN in the Summer 2007, inviting all trained forensic interviewers in the state. Two additional CACs were accredited in Fall 2007 (bringing the total to four), and WVCAN received Chapter Membership with the National Children's Alliance.

WVCAN secured an NCA Chapter Support Grant in 2008 and hired a State Coordinator, Emily Chittenden-Laird, the first WVCAN paid staff position. Emily hit the ground running, and by 2011 won the New Chapter Leader award by the National Children's Alliance for her work. More staff positions were added with time as the needs expanded across the state.

WVCAN recognized early on that it needed to diversify their Board. They had grown from an informal network of center directors to an incorporated nonprofit, and they needed to evolve again. Because their Board was comprised of all CAC directors, they found the network was too small – they were talking about themselves to themselves. They also knew they didn't have the type of expertise to ensure the organization had the right type of oversight: legal, fiscal, and ethical. Thus, at a strategic planning retreat one year, they developed a staged-plan to diversify their Board to include members of the community.

It was incredibly important as they moved their leadership outward that the community Board President be the right person, and she was. Mimi Wilson agreed to be the President and has given WVCAN a gift that will live far beyond the reaches her term limit – the gift of knowing our community believes in the network and supports them.

Present Day

In 2015, two additional staff members were brought on, bringing the total to four full-time employees. Today, WVCAN is made up of 20 CACs (and one developing center in the works) and all are nationally accredited. The work of WVCAN and CACs over the past decade is the work of countless individuals: donors, investigators, treatment professionals, CAC staff, board members, volunteers, legislators, and allies – all of whom understand that it takes a team to give a child his or her best chance. For more information, visit www.wvcn.org.