

Grand Forks Herald (ND)

May 9, 2005

Program to Help Abused Youth Could be U.S. Template

New facility will focus on needs of victims of child abuse, sexual assault and domestic violence.

By Rubén Rosario, St. Paul Pioneer Press

[Red Lake, Minn.] – The image and concerns in the minds of Judy Roy and Tom Heffelfinger were strikingly similar: A child-abuse victim from the Red Lake Indian Reservation, placed in the back seat of a federal agent’s car, en route to a St. Paul facility at least five hours away for evaluation and treatment.

“There’s nothing up there (northern Minnesota) with this kind of expertise or resources,” Heffelfinger, the state’s chief federal prosecutor, said recently of St. Paul’s Midwest Children’s Resource Center. “I and others were concerned about the additional trauma the trip and the separation were having on the children.”

So was Roy, though from a more intimate perspective. As a longtime Head Start teacher and reservation resident, the secretary for the Red Lake Tribal Council likely taught or knows some of the victims, if not their families.

“I can’t imagine the trauma involved when someone who is supposed to be there to care and nurture you violates that so horribly,” Roy said this week. “These children are often removed from the home, taken to a strange place, and wondering what they ever did to deserve this burden.”

New facility

A meeting of the minds was reached several months ago. It has led to the Family Advocacy Center of Northern Minnesota, a one-of-its-kind facility that could serve as a national model for rural communities.

“There’s nothing like it I know in this state, if not elsewhere,” said James Hanko, who runs the North Country Health Services in Bemidji, where the center will be located. A ribbon-cutting ceremony for the center, expected to open this summer, is planned later this month.

The center, which will have medical and social service staff specially trained by the St. Paul facility, will focus on the medical, social and law enforcement needs of victims of child abuse, sexual assault and domestic violence. Everything from evidence gathering to referral services to a warm shoulder to cry or lean on.

Although American Indian victims are a primary focus, the center will offer services to 10 surrounding counties as well as the Leech Lake and White Earth reservations.

“It would have been a shame to have such a center for a limited population,” Roy said of the idea to expand the center’s initial focus on child victims to general family violence. “This violence cuts across all lines.”

While the per-capita violent-crime rate among American Indians is more than twice the national average, the percentage of intimate and family violence experienced by American Indian victims is roughly the same as whites and other groups, according to a Justice Department study.

Undercurrents

But there are some troubling undercurrents: American Indian children suffer among the highest rates of child abuse or neglect, compared with other racial or ethnic groups. Also, the rate of violent crime experienced by American Indian women is nearly 50 percent higher than that reported by African-American males.

But crime in budget-strapped rural communities – many facing high rates of poverty, scarce or fragmented resources, high unemployment and declining populations, also is a serious concern.

A statistical report compiled by the Bemidji-based Center for Reducing Rural Violence found that the 15 Minnesota counties with the highest overall crime rate, as well as offenses against families and children, were rural. And many are located in the general area the center plans to serve.

Hanko and others mention that the center is the result of a multi-agency partnership that includes federal, county and local police, tribal officials, social workers, and medical personnel. A board of directors that includes Roy, Red Lake Tribal Chairman Floyd Jourdain Jr., and Dr. Carolyn Levitt of the St. Paul facility, will oversee the nonprofit center, which recently launched a \$1 million fund-raising campaign.

“We are providing training and technical assistance,” explained Levitt, who serves as executive director of the Midwest Children’s Resource Center.

“A lot of these cases are wrought with problems, and there’s a critical need to accurately diagnose whether there’s evidence of sexual or physical abuse, as well as serve the child’s medical and psychological needs.”

Heffelfinger praised the center as an admirable partnership of tribal and non-Indian entities, but stressed the concept was not driven by concerns about making a criminal case.

“This is, and perhaps this is not the best way to describe it, a one-stop shopping place to help these victims,” he said. “But this is about recovery and trying to help break that generational cycle of violence that is found everywhere.”

Leavitt calls Roy the “all-star” behind the center concept. Roy in turn credits Heffelfinger for working to bring all the players together.

But the credit belongs to the young victims, she says.

“This really all started with them.”

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