

Children's Advocacy Centers™ of Texas and the DFPS Sunset Advisory Commission Staff Report

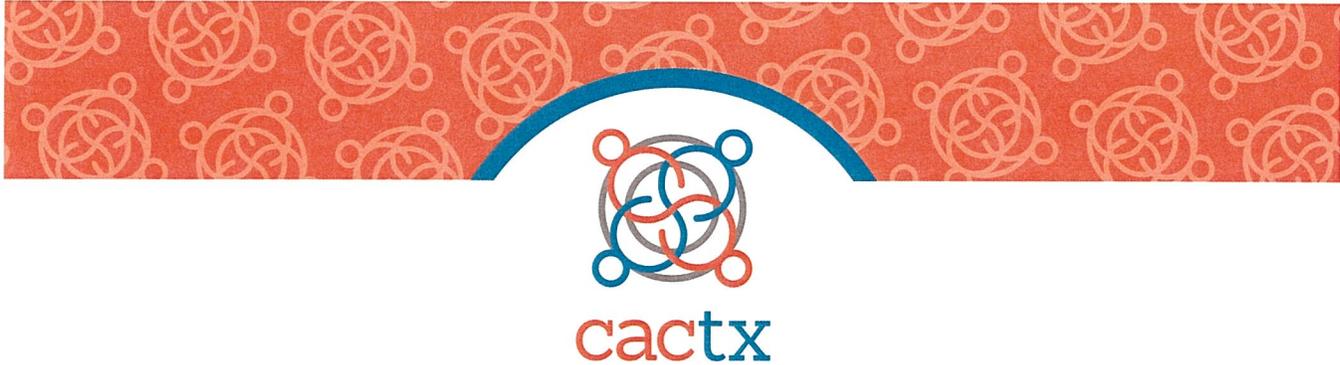
The mission and purpose of children's advocacy centers (CACs), as outlined in Texas Family Code Chapter 264, is to coordinate joint investigations of child abuse between the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS), local law enforcement, and prosecution and ensure the seamless provision of aftercare services such as trauma-informed mental health. Both the State Legislature (SB 6, 79th Legislature) and national best practices dictate that cases involving victims of alleged abuse, particularly Priority 1 sexual and physical abuse cases, should be coordinated through a CAC where the following professional services will be provided: forensic interview, joint investigation with law enforcement, specialized medical and mental health services, and family advocacy. According to best practices, a CAC should be the first stop for a child after the case has been assigned for investigation. The only way children come to a CAC is through a CPS (Child Protective Services), Child Care Licensing (CCL), Adult Protective Services (APS), or law enforcement referral. Each year, CACs sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU) and working protocol with CPS, CCL, APS, over 800 law enforcement jurisdictions, over 200 district and county attorneys, every children's hospital in the state, and countless sexual assault nurse examiners. The MOUs and working protocols for each CAC, often influenced by local CAC capacity, outline what types of cases and age ranges will be brought to the CAC for a forensic interview and the locally agreed-upon process for initiating a multidisciplinary team (MDT) response.

DFPS Sunset Advisory Commission Staff Report Issue 5 states that DFPS does not ensure maximum use of CACS

- The investigation of child abuse can be difficult for all involved. Families must contend with both the civil and criminal justice systems, which can be complex, confusing, and often re-traumatizing. Civil and criminal investigators face challenges as they try to collect information and evidence while working under different mandates, timelines, and expertise. Investigators need a system that coordinates information sharing and effective fact finding. The CAC model was developed to address these needs by facilitating a victim-centered, MDT approach to the investigation and prosecution of child abuse cases, providing forensic interviews, and delivering specialized therapeutic recovery services with the ultimate goal of facilitating justice and healing for children and their families.
- CACs serve two clients—the child and the multidisciplinary team, which DFPS is a part of through a MOUs. CACs endeavor to support DFPS in its investigation of child abuse and initiation of recovery services. DFPS should not be solely responsible for its mandate; public/private partners like CACs exist to buoy up the DFPS system as a whole with additional resources, expertise, and operationalized best practices.
- Although the focus of CACs is primarily on child victims of sexual abuse, with additional resources, the CAC MDT model can be utilized for other populations and issue areas such as child fatality reviews, human trafficking victims, and other areas of child maltreatment. The MDT approach is a tried and true model that can serve as an adaptable structure without having to “recreate the wheel.”
- As one of the leading providers of forensic interviews and trauma-focused, evidenced-based mental health services for abused children, CACs are a partner, expert, and resource for DFPS. DFPS should capitalize on each and every opportunity to utilize a CAC in order to provide child victims of abuse with the most effective and efficient investigation possible in order to successfully fulfill its mandate of protecting the children of Texas.

DFPS Sunset Advisory Commission Staff Report Recommendation 5.6 recommends that DFPS should monitor the use and evaluate the effectiveness of investigation resources, including CACs

- Currently, there is no tracking mechanism outside of the lengthy caseworker narrative to denote that a child has received a CAC interview. This inhibits the ability of both CPS supervisors and CACs to clearly see if children are getting the required services. In some cases children have even received more than one interview when there was a change in caseworker.
- Providing CACs direct third party access to IMPACT will enable CACs to facilitate services by ensuring that children fitting predetermined and agreed upon protocols are brought to a CAC for an interview. Currently, CACs have no ability to assist in scheduling interviews or coordinating services because of the lack of visibility. CAC access to IMPACT will provide more opportunities for CPS to leverage CAC services.
- Adding additional IMPACT fields can assist in serving children more effectively by collecting better data.



- Additional IMPACT fields can easily indicate whether a child has been taken to a CAC and can also serve as a prompt for caseworkers to initiate this important step in the investigation process. If cases that meet the agreed upon protocol are not coming to a CAC, this field would give CACs the ability to determine why and troubleshoot if there is a quality or accessibility issue with the CAC interviewer.
- To ensure maximum use of CACs and to evaluate effectiveness, DFPS should track provision of follow-up services to children and families involved in sexual abuse cases at the close of an investigation that are not provided by the state.
 - Of all “reason to believe” sexual abuse cases, 80% are closed with no follow-up action (i.e., they do not go into Family Based Safety Services (FBSS) or Conservatorship). These children often present with post-traumatic stress disorder and high depression scores, yet are not afforded any services by the state after the investigation is closed. Anecdotal evidence suggests that caseworkers often do not refer these children to FBSS or Conservatorship when services are available at a CAC. However, there is no way to track or ensure that these children are getting any type of follow-up care when the transition from CPS to the CAC occurs.
 - Additional IMPACT fields can assist in tracking critical follow-up services when a CPS case is closed. Breaking the cycle of abuse is dependent upon early intervention that addresses trauma. The long-term impacts of untreated trauma are well-documented (e.g., teenage pregnancy, illicit drug use, involvement in the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems). CACs are required by statute to offer trauma-focused, evidence-based mental health services to children and their non-offending caregivers. The state has a vested interest in ensuring that these victims are afforded recovery services, but current systems do not formally track where/how the services are provided once CPS closes the case. The combination of continuing mental health services, case management, and stabilizing family services and support for non-offending caregivers at CACs essentially equate to “FBSS Lite” with no additional expense to DFPS. Additional fields:
 - If an investigation is determined “reason to believe” but not referred to FBSS or Conservatorship, was the child sent to a CAC for recovery services? (Yes or No)
 - Was this a reason for closure? (Yes or No)

DFPS Sunset Advisory Commission Staff Report Issue 2 speaks to both the limitations of IMPACT and inconsistency of policies and procedures across the state

- Constant change in policies and reform after reform can contribute to the underutilization of CACs, disrupt the functioning of multidisciplinary teams and ultimately compromise best practices for child abuse victims. As the DFPS Sunset Advisory Commission Staff Report points out, DFPS needs to focus on the aspects of its day-to-day work and utilize partners like CACs to help ease administrative burdens and coordinate joint investigations.
- CACTX asks DFPS to leverage CACs to help it in its inherently difficult, but absolutely imperative protective mission. CACs are committed to helping DFPS protect Texas’ most vulnerable children.

Stephen Group CPS Operational Review and CACs

The assessment findings in the Stephen Group CPS Operational Review point out that CACs are “very effective.” CPS units that are co-located at 17 CACs across the state “showed clear signs of integration and collaboration between all staff,” “good team work and integration,” and “remarkably lower” turnover than non-co-located CPS staff. In fact, in the first quarter of FY 14, 10 of the 17 CACs with co-located CPS staff had 0% turnover.

The Stephen Group points out a lack of coordination between CPS and law enforcement in working child abuse investigations, despite the Legislatures endorsement of joint investigations. Disjointed investigations can result in “a missed opportunity to provide wrap-around services and engage MDTs” and “can reduce the usage of [the] best practice model found at the CACs, which can hurt case outcomes both for prosecutors and for children involved.” Ways to strengthen the relationship between DFPS and CACs still remain. The Sunset Advisory Commission Staff Report provides a good starting point to strengthen this relationship.