

Child Advocacy Center Operational Status Discussed

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Long Caption

Dist. 2 County Commissioner Melissa Dennis reads a prepared statement to attendees of the weekly board meeting Monday, Nov. 15. Dennis said, "Mr. Williams alleges that I wish for the CAC to be shut down because I want to reopen and run the agency in order to look like a hero...all for political reasons. I just want it stated for the record that his statements regarding my motives couldn't be further from the truth." Commissioners Eddie Stackhouse (left) and Randy Thomas quietly listen to the statement. Countywide & Sun/ Suzie Campbell

Body

Up to \$400,000 was approved to keep the Child Advocacy Center open and running on Aug. 30. Less than a week later, the CAC Executive Director La-Trenda Sanders was fired.

During the Sep. 20 meeting of the Pottawatomie County Commissioners Attorney Mike Ashworth addressed the board and said the SANE (Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner) Nurse and the family advocate had been locked out of the facility. As of Monday, Nov. 15, another

employee was fired, and District Attorney Allan Grubb confirmed on Tuesday, the center is now operating with one full-time employee and volunteers.

A lengthy discussion about the status of the CAC took up much of the Nov. 15 meeting. Several involved in the discussion felt the best way to address the current situation was to suspend services temporarily. However, on Nov. 16, when the *Countywide & Sun* asked DA Grubb his thoughts on suspending services, he said, "I am trying to avoid shutting down or suspending services. We are working with volunteers to maintain services."

The *Countywide & Sun* also asked Grubb what changes he thought needed to be made. He said, "That's a tough question, the funding model for this center has never been solid. Grant money has been the primary source of funding, and it ebbs and flows. This year VOCA, the main grant that funds this center, had a huge cut at the national level as it was running out of money. The US Congress did pass the VOCA fix bill, but it won't fix anything until the 2023 funding cycle."

Grubb said, "CACs will always have to rely on grants to some extent, but the community needs to come together and create a non-profit that works to actually fundraise and run this center. This center should not be something ran under the DAs Office. I truly believe in this community it is easier to raise money to save a dog than a child."

Grubb said Michael Williams was looking into helping set up a not-for-profit and providing initial funding. "I'm trying to setup a situation where we don't have to use all the public funds. I don't want to use all that county money if we can actually get private citizens to take an interest in saving children and put their money and time into it. It needs a non-profit that is funded, properly setup, and properly run."

Dennis said, "I'd like to address a statement that has recently been put on social media by Mr. Michael Williams regarding my opinion and position on the viability of the child advocacy center and its current operational status." (The entire statement can be read by entering this link [https:// bit.ly/3klo7Dw](https://bit.ly/3klo7Dw))

"Mr. Williams alleges that I wish for the CAC to be shut down because I want to reopen and run the agency in order to look like a hero, all for political reasons" said Dennis. "I just want it stated for the record that his statements regarding my motives couldn't be further from the truth."

"Prior to the citizens of this county petitioning the commissioners for funding assistance, we [Pott. County Commissioners] were aware of the CAC's activities in this county but not well-versed in the complexity of their functions and statutory requirements," said Dennis. "Since we, the county commissioners, voted to provide the funding, I have committed to learning the role and requirements of Child Advocacy Centers. I believe that as a fulfillment of due

diligence and responsibility in supporting our youngest and most vulnerable citizens, we need to understand the processes, regulations, and best practices surrounding these types of entities. I have put my heart and soul into doing this over the past several months.”

“I have observed dysfunction, disorganization, and chaos,” Dennis said. “Therefore, after numerous conversations with the current staff and with the professional men and women involved, it is my opinion that this is NOT an environment in which the children of our county are receiving the best possible services. I have said to numerous individuals that I felt it might be best for all who are concerned about the children and families in need of these services to take a step back and temporarily close the CAC. Then come together with all involved parties, and with the help of our state partner, the county’s funding, and determine a new course of action in order to actually do what is best for the children of our county - not to just continue on this destructive, wasteful, mismanaged and irresponsible path we are currently on.”

Dist. 2 Commissioner and board chairman Randy Thomas asked, “What solutions do we have?”

But before the discussion began, Dennis asked DA Grubb if Mr. Williams had anything to do with the CAC. Grubb replied, “No.”

Dennis said, “that makes me feel better.”

She then replied to Thomas, “You know, I don’t know, because we don’t have the power to take it over right now. I don’t know what I would like for us to do. I’ve said, and this is my opinion, we’re not voting; I would like for us to step back. Not, maybe close the center is a wrong word, but just to make it inactive for some time until we can – with our funding, with the staff, with our health, with our partners – find out how we can get this thing built up to where it’s not the laughingstock of the state.”

Grubb said, currently, there is someone who comes in to do the non-acute care, and “Vanessa Parsons is working on volunteer advocates to be there so she can do the acute [care].”

Dennis asked if funding allocated by the county could be used to help with transportation, and memorandums of understanding could be set up so the victims could be seen at other facilities.

“I will volunteer to do anything I have to do,” said Dennis. “But we got, this mess has got to stop, and we’ve got to, we’ve got to just get this back on the right track. I mean, who cares about re-election? I don’t give a dang. But we’ve got to get this back on the...”

“The only way to do that is to get a 501c3 that’s properly funded to run the center,” said Grubb.

Dennis said, “I agree. But in order to do that, do you not have to close this one and reopen this one?”

Grubb said, “No, you can transfer.”

Tecumseh Police Chief JR Kidney gave a brief history of the beginnings of the hope for the Family Justice Center, One Safe Place but said this was not a Family Justice Center – it is a Child Advocacy Center.

Kidney said, “From what I understand, the agency heads are kind of the Executive Board of the CAC that meet and make sure that the standards are met to get the grants and the accreditations and all that kind of stuff. So we’ve got some kind of authority. Probably not hire fire, shut down whatever authority that we may need. But it would be my suggestion, and I think the terminology that you may be looking for is suspend services.”

“Let’s suspend the services,” said Kidney. “That way, the integrity of that center, the confidentiality of that center, and everything remains intact.”

“I don’t know, Mr. Williams,” said Chief Kidney. “I’ve never met him a day in my life. But if he’s in and out of our center, I’ve got concerns about confidentiality and things of that nature. That really concerns me.”

Kidney said, “I feel like suspending the services, form a committee, whatever you got to do...get with those people that do this for a living. And let’s fix our center and bring it back to what it was. And then – long-term goals – if we can get that center up and running, we may look at JFC or whatever, later down the road.”

He said, “Let’s take care of the children Pottawattamie County and the people that are going to run it, whoever that is, or whatever, make sure that they can go to work, not scared, not intimidated, not anything. Suspend it, not allowing services to go on over there for a little bit. Do a memorandum of understanding or whatever – my opinion. The Sheriff’s here, whoever else wants to say something? I think that’s an avenue that you ought to do. That’s my two cents.”

Kidney said this was not something he believed could be fixed in a week or two. It would take some time. He said it would be an inconvenience for a little while and all law enforcement would need to understand where to go and how to get the services

“There’s a lot of moving parts in this thing,” said Kidney. “So it’s gonna be an inconvenience for us for a little while, but I just think for overall transparency, integrity, confidentiality, and all that, I think we just keep digging a hole further and further, and it makes us all look bad— every one of us.

Sheriff Michael Book agreed with Kidney. He said, "As a law enforcement agency head, I know that other law enforcement agencies will want to do the same thing. The confidentiality and protect that from the center And no unauthorized person should be over there being involved in because of the confidential nature that we have with our victims. They shouldn't be involved in anything that has to do with that center."

Booth said, "And I'm just appalled by how lax that has been. And to be able to have some one come in and have any kind of influence in that center to the cause any kind of disruption should never happen in the first place. And we got to fix that from the ground up, make sure we get back on track."

Sheriff said, "And in the meantime, temporarily, we'll still take care of the victims. We'll still take them where we need to go to take care [of them]. It's going to be a little bit of a hardship for everybody, but we have to fix this. It has to, that has to be done. Absolutely. So I'm on board."

Deputy Scott Hawkins said he wanted it to be known that all those at the CAC had done an outstanding job, and a lot of great work had been done. He said he had suggested that a checklist be developed to help stay on top of all the standards.

Thomas wrapped up the thirty-minute discussion stating, "We need to set up a plan of attack. Visit with Carrie Little from the CAC of Oklahoma. And, don't let anyone not authorized in." Grubb shook his head, yes, and the meeting moved to the next agenda item.