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OPINION // EDITORIALS

ChildSafe's work benefiting community

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Philanthropist Harvey E. Najim and Childsafe President and CEO Kim Abernethy embrace for a moment in this 2016 file photo. The two have led the way in building ChildSafe's immaculate new campus on the East Side.

Photo: Tom Reel / SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS

Stopping the cycle of child abuse and neglect can be difficult when so many of the victims suffer in silence.

It is estimated only one of every 10 abused children will report what happened, and even when a child does file an abuse report, it often doesn't occur immediately. For many children that outcry for help will come two years after the abuse occurs, meaning they will have suffered in silence. Compounding their trauma is that, all too

often, abused children continue to interact with their abusers, who are usually people they trusted such as family members or acquaintances.

Ensuring children who report abuse feel safe and secure as they go through the process is key to their healing and recovery. Equally important is raising awareness of the problem, educating the public on detecting possible abuse and acquainting adults with the reporting process when abuse is suspected.

San Antonio is fortunate to be among the first six communities in the state to have established a child advocacy center to help meet those needs. First incorporated in 1992 as the Alamo Children's Advocacy Center, the nonprofit later changed its name to ChildSafe. With a mission to serve abused and neglected children, ChildSafe has developed a strong network of criminal justice and child protective services professionals to serve area families.

For the last 22 years, ChildSafe has operated at a location off U.S. Highway 90 on a 7.9-acre site donated by the Baptist Children's Home Ministries. This summer ChildSafe will be moving into a new facility on the city's East Side at Interstate 10 and East Houston Street. It is a much larger facility that will house 56 ChildSafe employees and employees with a number of its partners, including the San Antonio Police Department, Bexar County Sheriff's office, Child Protective Services, the district attorney's office and county juvenile probation department. It's a one-stop shop to meet the needs of these vulnerable young Texans.

At 65,000 square feet, the new building on the \$28.5 million wooded campus is five times the size of the current facility. The new site also includes 43,000 square feet of green space, rooftop gardens, courtyards and outdoor therapy areas.

The more central location makes it easier to access by public transportation. Thus far \$25.7 million has been raised to fund the project, which includes \$2.5 million from the City of San Antonio and a generous \$5 million donation from local philanthropist Harvey E. Najim.

Last year, there were 5,865 confirmed cases of child abuse and neglect in Bexar County, placing it at the top of the list of urban counties. In other words, we were rock bottom. In 2017, there were eight children deaths attributed to physical abuse, according to ChildSafe.

Training adults about how to detect abuse and neglect is a big part of ChildSafe's mission. Annually the center educates more than 30,000 school district employees, child care workers, law enforcement officers and others on how to recognize and report child abuse. The majority of the calls to the state's child abuse and neglect hotline come from teachers. The biggest reporting day is usually on the first day of classes after summer break.

ChildSafe's fundraising is not over. ChildSafe President and CEO Kim K. Abernethy said there are still efforts to raise another \$12 million. The money will help complete the project and establish a \$4 million operational endowment. A public capital campaign will launch in April.

The effort merits support. It's an investment in the wellbeing of many of the most vulnerable children in our community. There is no higher calling.

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