

San Antonio



Illustration By Vincent Marti

PEOPLE

Kim Abernethy

ChildSafe CEO says new campus provides healing for clients and staff

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The best part about ChildSafe's new \$26.5 million Harvey E. Najim Children & Family Center near Salado Creek isn't its lush gardens, outdoor ropes course or beautifully designed counseling spaces, says CEO Kim Abernethy. The best part since opening in

August is getting to tell kids and families who walk through the door that the facility is for them. "To see their face when they see this beautiful building that's for them—they feel safe and comfortable in a time that is the most devastating," says Abernethy, who took the lead at ChildSafe 10 years ago after stints at Cibolo Nature Center in Boerne and the San Antonio River Foundation.

The nonprofit children's advocacy center serves kids who've been abused or neglected and in its new center also houses partners like Child Protective Services workers, police and sheriff's officials and members of the District Attorney's office so that the process of navigating a child and family through the system can be as seamless as possible. Early in her career, she worked in children's mental health and social work and says she was glad to return to the field after gaining experience at other nonprofits in fundraising and collaborating.

When she first arrived at ChildSafe, Abernethy says the nonprofit was in need of some changes. "We wanted to get it running more like a business," she says. She spent those first few years working with the board and organization's leadership to increase efficiency and found they were able to serve more children with fewer staff members after some restructuring. The organization focused on becoming a leader in trauma-sensitive care and as the need for services continued to increase, the staff began to grow again and the vision for a new campus was born. "Everything that I had done before getting here kind of led me to this," she says.

Tell us about the work ChildSafe does.

We have three major things that we do. First, we're involved in the investigation of a case. Our involvement is that we conduct the forensic interviews for those children who are thought to have been abused. That starts the process. From there we coordinate the investigation, which is a primary function of a children's advocacy center. That's very important because it keeps everyone communicating and moving forward. Even before the first interview, we have family support specialists who are case managers. They work with the family to explain the process because this is often their entry into the child welfare system. A lot of these cases are criminal and child welfare cases and they don't always move at the same pace so the specialist is there with them through that. Sometimes the alleged perpetrator is in the home and they're removed or the mother and children have to move so we help get them connected with services.

The second piece is we provide trauma-focused care and treatment/counseling. We believe that you can't just provide counseling to the child. The whole family has been affected so we want to offer counseling for the whole family.

The third piece is prevention and awareness. We want people to not only know how to recognize and report abuse but also to help children be able to have a voice and know they can go to adults and talk if they are being abused. Our Cardboard Kids campaign (which takes place every April when people in the community decorate a cardboard cutout) has helped raise awareness of abuse. We also train a lot of teachers. The Texas Education Agency requires that every employee must be trained annually in recognizing abuse so we offer online and face-to-face classes in English and Spanish. We also offer training for parents. We trained over 30,000 individuals last fiscal year.

San Antonio has the highest proportionate rate of confirmed child abuse cases among Texas' major metropolitan cities. Why are the rates here so high?

It's hard to nail it down. We do know that we have high teen pregnancy rates. We have some issues with education rates and unemployment. There's really no way for us to know or track. We see some trends, but there's really nothing we can say. It's just a guess. What we know, based on national statistics that hold true for San Antonio, is that one in five children will be sexually abused before their 18th birthday. That doesn't even include neglect or physical abuse (in 2018, there were 5,865 confirmed cases of abuse or neglect in Bexar County). Of those kids who are sexually abused, only one in 10 will speak out. Last year we served 6,500 families and if we keep our current growth rate up it will be 8,000 this year. When we look at our numbers increasing, we hope that it means awareness is growing and more children are speaking out.

Your new campus grew out of that increased need. Tell us about that.

We started this process for the new building about five years ago because our numbers were starting to increase and we were starting to increase staff. Over the last three years we increased staff and the number of people we served by 100 percent. The best practice model for children's advocacy centers is to have the partners that you work with in the same building. We knew that was something we were really missing. We have also really transformed our services to be trauma-informed and to focus on the child *and* the family. We needed a building that would not only hold our partners—law enforcement, juvenile probation, the DA's office and CPS—but also promote healing. It needed to promote healing for clients but also for the 100-plus people who work here. This is really, really tough work and we've created beautiful spaces for them, too, including a café where they can talk or bring their lunch and look out over a garden. We know that turnover for CPS and law enforcement is lower when they're able to co-locate in a building like this.

It's also closely tied with nature. Why?

This building is a national model in many aspects. We have some things that no one else in the country has. We have built this to be a beautiful place that incorporates nature, which we know is healing. We're situated on a 36-acre plot along the Salado Creek. It was a family homestead site that was never developed. The campus encompasses 15 acres and we deeded 21 acres to the city to create a park. They're working on designing a trail from our property and expanding the Salado Creek Greenway. We're also adjacent to MLK Park. We've created an adventure therapy program on 5 acres that includes a ropes course and places for trauma-focused adventure therapy and camping. The building has 65,000 square feet of indoor space and 43,000 square feet of courtyards, gardens and picnic areas. We wanted part of the campus to be a place that families could enjoy even if they're not bringing their children here for services. For the families and children that we are serving, this is the most devastating time in their life. It's important to have a building that is beautiful and welcoming and says to them, 'I'm special. I'm important. I'm safe.'

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Fact File

Years with ChildSafe: 10

To Report Child Abuse: Call 1-800-252-5400; for services through ChildSafe, call 210-675-9000

Get Involved: Become a greeter, help maintain therapy gardens and more. childsafe-sa.org

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