

New child advocacy center is sought

Prosecutor: Clearinghouse for abuse victims too small

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BY JUDITH LUCAS

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Assistant Union County Prosecutor John Esmerado hears these stories from abused children and their parents almost every day: A 3-year-old is sexually assaulted at a day care center in Elizabeth; a 5-year-old contracts genital warts; a 2-month-old is dropped on her head as her parents argue.

It doesn't help that the telling and retelling of these horror stories occurs in a spare room equipped with a few tables and chairs inside a run-down Victorian house on Westfield Avenue in Elizabeth. The center acts as a clearinghouse for reported cases of sexual and physical abuse of children 12 and under. It is there that reports are taken and investigators determine if there is enough evidence for a complaint and eventual trial.

Esmerado said the county-owned building is not functional for him and his investigators. Last year it became infested with raccoons.

He and his boss, Union County Prosecutor Theodore Romankow, want the freeholders to chip in \$2 million to buy land and build a new child advocacy center. Another \$3 million would come from donations to the Friends of the Child Advocacy Foundation, created specifically to raise funds for the project.

"The building is old," Romankow said. "It was fine in 1995 (the year it opened), but we have totally outgrown it. There are 15 to 18 employees there. It was supposed to be for four or five people. It is dilapidated. We want something modern."

Ideally, Romankow wants a 10,000-square-foot house, with room for prosecutors, detectives, probation officers, DYFS workers, a nurse and psychologist. They would work together under one roof so the abused children would not have to be sent out to other facilities for any needed services.

Ideally, the lot would be big enough for 25 cars and be in a location like Elizabeth or as far away as Hillside.

Thousands of cases come through the child advocacy center, about 500 in each of the last three years. And the numbers are expected to keep climbing.

A defendant is charged in half the reported cases.

Esmerado said children often must tell their stories six times -- to the nurse, Division of Youth and Family Services workers, investigators and eventually prosecutors and the jury.

"We want to decrease the number of times we talk to children," Esmerado said, probably down to four times.

The children would not have to continue to relive their trauma, Esmerado said.

"The abusers steal the love from children and replace it with fear and anger," Romankow said. "They need someone to protect them. This is one of those projects that has to succeed. We have the lives of those children in our hands. We want to raise the money within a year, with construction completed by 2010."

Union County Freeholder Angel Estrada said he supports the project.

"This is a very heart-wrenching story," Estrada said. "There is not anyone on this board who is against this project. In issues dealing with children, we must provide the right platform to make sure they are helped and the perpetrators serve time. We are working together to do the right thing."

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