



The Victor S. Johnson III
Nashville Children's Alliance
— a child advocacy center —



Nashville Children's Alliance (NCA) is the child advocacy center for Nashville and Davidson County. NCA serves all children in Davidson County ages 3 - 17 when sexual or severe physical abuse allegations are reported, with the majority of referrals coming from the Tennessee Department of Children's Services (DCS) and the Metro Nashville Police Department (MNPd). NCA is a child-focused, trauma-informed therapeutic environment designed to meet the needs of child abuse victims and their non-offending family members. NCA is involved in child sexual and severe physical abuse cases from the first allegation of abuse until after the case is resolved in court, at absolutely no cost to families. Since 1992, NCA has worked to deliver and coordinate the services required for children to escape abuse, begin the healing process, and look forward to bright futures.

The mission of NCA is to reduce the trauma of child abuse victims and their families by facilitating a comprehensive multidisciplinary team approach to detection, investigation, prosecution and treatment of child abuse. Since 2019, NCA is housed at the Family Safety Center (FSC), a groundbreaking co-working space that facilitates services between Metro Nashville Police Department (MNPd), the Department of Children's Services (DCS), the District Attorney General's Office (DA), and various nonprofit organizations. In collaboration with these partners, NCA works with children and non-offending caregivers using three evidence-based approaches: forensic interviews, Child Protective Investigative Team (CPIT) coordination, and trauma-informed therapy.

An essential aspect of the services provided by NCA is the forensic interview process for alleged victims of child abuse. A forensic interview allows a specially trained Forensic

Interviewer to gain details about possible abuse from a child in his or her own words. The interviewer is sensitive to the child's emotional and developmental needs, and gathers as many facts as possible about the allegations in a comfortable and child-focused manner. All forensic interviews conducted by NCA follow the National Child Advocacy Forensic Interview protocol to ensure that they are legally-defensible and age-appropriate conversations with a child that elicit detailed information about an event that the child may have experienced or witnessed.

To ensure families receive services in the most effective way, NCA coordinates the Child Protective Investigative Team (CPIT), working in a multi-disciplinary way with the MNPd, the DA's Office, juvenile court officers, Our Kids, and the Vanderbilt Care Team to treat the aftermath of child abuse and to bring abusers to justice. In this model, a child only needs to tell their story once. By telling his or her story to a highly-trained, professional NCA forensic interviewer who preserves the child's testimony as evidence, the child avoids being re-traumatized by the need to tell the story multiple times to various authorities. NCA also partners with the Sexual Assault Center to meet the demand for therapy for child sexual abuse survivors, and with Prevent Child Abuse Tennessee to educate the public on how to recognize and prevent child abuse. Since its foundation, NCA has shepherded 20,000 severe child abuse cases through this CPIT process.

The therapists at NCA are some of the most highly trained trauma therapists in the Nashville area. Each therapist has specialized training and credentialing in multiple evidenced based/informed treatment modalities. Each of the therapists at NCA are trained in assessing each client

and family's need for a certain treatment modality and developing a specialized treatment plan. Our therapists being highly trained allows our clients to receive the most current and highest quality of treatment possible. NCA offers multiple therapies tailored toward children who have been abused, including play therapy and Trauma Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TFCBT), both of which have shown more positive outcomes at the end of the therapy than the control or comparison groups in research studies. Depending on the child and family's needs, NCA's highly trained therapists will select a therapy from our four therapy frameworks: Expressive Therapies, Attachment and Family Strengthening Therapies, Therapeutic Frameworks, and Traditional Trauma Therapies.

In 2020, the organizational impacts of NCA include:

- Reviewed 1,241 cases of alleged child abuse;
- Conducted 421 Forensic Interviews;
- Coordinated 56 Child Protective Investigative Team investigations
- Facilitated 3 multi-disciplinary team trainings;
- Delivered 3,806 therapy sessions to children, parents, and families;
- Conducted 21 groups for non-offending parents, caregivers, and children.

In 2019, there were 75,759 reports of child abuse in Tennessee; in Davidson County alone, there were over 6,843 reports, an increase of 661 reports from the previous year ("Reported child abuse cases in Tennessee/Davidson County" KIDS COUNT Data Center, 2020). The numbers are staggering and heartbreaking, and NCA is the only organization of its kind in all of Metro Nashville. The majority of referrals to NCA come from the Department of Children's Services (DCS) and Metro police. In 2019, NCA reviewed 1,260 cases of alleged abuse, with 49% of clients reporting as African American, 2% Biracial, 13% Hispanic, 32% White, and 4% as multiracial or unable to determine. All services are provided free of charge, and are conducted in both English and Spanish.

In 2019, there were 6,843 reports of child abuse in Davidson County, Tennessee ("Reported child abuse cases in Davidson" KIDS COUNT Data Center, 2020). As alarming as these statistics are, annual child maltreatment statistics are an underestimate of the scope of child maltreatment, because annual statistics fail to capture the cumulative risk of maltreatment across childhood ("Editorial: How badly do we undercount chronic maltreatment, and how

much should clinicians care?" Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 2019). Social distancing and economic strain due to the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the risk of child abuse ("Parental Social Isolation and Child Maltreatment Risk during the COVID-19 Pandemic" Journal of Family Violence, 2021), while child maltreatment reports dropped as much as 70% during the pandemic due to children's lack of exposure to mandated reporters ("Child abuse prevention month in the context of COVID-19" Center for Innovation in Child Maltreatment Policy, 2020). Long-term effects of child abuse can include posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms, depression, externalizing behavior problems, delinquency, and drug abuse ("Long-term Cognitive, Psychological, and Health Outcomes Associated With Child Abuse and Neglect" Official Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics, 2020). However, these children are not without hope. Nashville Children's Alliance (NCA) is committed to investigate, heal, and deliver justice to children who have been abused.

There is a significant relationship between Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and mental health outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD ("Adverse Childhood Experiences and Mental Health Among Incarcerated Womxn" University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2020). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevent (CDC) discovered a link between childhood trauma and the chronic diseases people develop as adults, as well as social and emotional problems, including: heart disease, lung cancer, diabetes and many autoimmune diseases, as well as depression, violence, being a victim of violence ("Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)" CDC, 2020). One in twelve children in Tennessee, higher than the one in ten children nationally, has experienced three or more ACEs, placing them in a category of especially high risk ("The prevalence of adverse childhood experiences, nationally, by state, and by race or ethnicity" Child Trends, 2018). Multiple types of ACEs are significantly associated with lower school attendance and academic achievement, adding to the challenges that children who have been abused or neglected already face for achieving a happy and healthy life ("Adolescent Adversity, School Attendance and Academic Achievement: School Connection and the Potential for Mitigating Risk" Journal of School Health, 2020).

Empirical evidence shows that the detrimental effects of trauma related to child abuse, including increased risk of incarceration, can be lessened or even reversed, but it requires early intervention and treatment; to mitigate the detrimental effects of childhood violence and trauma, prevention and reduction of traumatic occurrences is

essential to the child’s healing process (“Preventing and Mitigating the Effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences” National Conference of State Legislatures, 2018). NCA works to mitigate these risks by providing support and services from the first child abuse allegations to healing. NCA leads the Davidson County Child Protective Investigative Team (CPIT), which brings together representatives from all agencies legally charged with addressing child abuse. By working in this multidisciplinary manner, a child needs to only tell their story once to preserve evidence. After NCA’s highly trained Forensic Interviewers have finished their part, NCA provides trauma-focused therapy to children between the ages of 3 and 17 who have been abused. NCA aims for a well-rounded approach to stopping the crime of child abuse, from prevention, detection, prosecution to healing.

The beneficiaries of NCA’s work are all the children of Davidson County, as NCA’s services are available to every child in Davidson County involved in allegations of sexual or severe physical abuse or having witnessed an act of violence. All services are provided at no cost to children or their families.

When a child experiences abuse, the trauma affects their ability to develop emotionally, psychologically, academically, and socially. Research on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) indicates abuse can impact physical health well into adulthood, increasing chances of diabetes, heart disease, and depression, among other illnesses. All of society pays a heavy price for these negative outcomes. The CDC estimates the lifetime economic costs associated with child abuse to be \$124 billion, a figure derived from productivity losses as well as health care, special education, child welfare, and criminal justice costs.

Before 1992, if a Davidson County child was thought to have been abused, s/he was subjected to multiple interviews in intimidating surroundings at various agencies, with little coordination among them. Because of the vertically integrated nature of the healthcare, social services, and criminal justice systems, victimized children were repeatedly re-traumatized by having to relive the abuse in interviews, in court, and with helping professionals—unduly delaying the healing process in the pursuit of satisfying the specific protocol of each organization.

The founding of the Nashville Children’s Alliance (NCA) changed victims’ lives by introducing a multidisciplinary model that brings together representatives from all the agencies legally charged with addressing child abuse. The Child Protective Investigative Team (CPIT) operates a

seamless, effective process to help families heal and to hold abusers accountable through coordinated procedures, regular communication, and weekly meetings.

By working in this multidisciplinary manner, each child only has to tell their story once, to a highly trained forensic interviewer in a child-focused environment. All necessary parties can then access that information to carry out their respective roles, which might look something like this: The Department of Children’s Services (DCS) receives a call to report abuse; DCS reviews the report and sends a child protection professional to the scene. If abuse appears to be present, the child will have a forensic interview with NCA and receive necessary medical care from Our Kids and Vanderbilt Care Team. NCA obtains and preserves the child’s testimony as evidence, and then begins working to treat the child and family’s trauma. Metro Police then investigates, identifies the perpetrator, and files charges. The District Attorney General’s office prosecutes the case against the perpetrator in criminal court. Meanwhile, the Juvenile Court makes decisions regarding custody of the child. DCS follows the child’s progress and manages the flow of their total care.

The result is that, unbeknownst to them, each child has an entire team of dedicated professionals—including their NCA Forensic Interviewer—sembled behind the scenes, tirelessly working to help him or her achieve safety and healing, all at no cost to their family. 🌟

