

**VISITATION**

Safety planning: Agency opens supervised visitation center in Auburn



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AUBURN | A home should always be a safe haven.

But for children stuck at the epicenter of a violent relationship, home is often a place of contained fear — a place where one parent berates and physically abuses another.

And when a victim of domestic violence finally makes a bid for freedom, their abuser sometimes uses custody exchanges as a

chance to reassert control using volatile, violent means.

The Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency, however, has devised a way to put custody exchanges on neutral ground.

At the agency's newly opened supervised visitation center, C/SCAA can orchestrate custody exchanges and oversee visits between parents and children — reducing the risk of harm.

Origins

The North Street supervised visitation center, aptly nicknamed "The Center," is not C/SCAA's first.

In 2004, the agency opened Safe Haven, a center where families could safely exchange their children or undergo supervised visits. Despite receiving heavy traffic, the agency repeatedly battled to keep the program running.

Safe Haven first lost funding one year after its inception, but was able to use leftover money to keep its doors open. But when the grant C/SCAA used to fuel the center wasn't renewed in 2011, the agency didn't have any reserves left to keep Safe Haven's lights on.

And so for more than two years, Cayuga County went without a supervised visitation center — without a neutral places for parents to safely exchange custody of their children.

The stretch of time, however, was not idly spent.

Soon after C/SCAA lost its funding, the county and the agency teamed up to open up a new center. They quickly won a grant, and immediately started planning.

Blueprints

Planning a supervised visitation center is an arduous process.

Sarah Barnard, director of C/SCAA's Domestic Violence Intervention Program, said the center's consulting committee — comprised of local advocates, judges and law enforcement personal — spent 20 months designing the center.

Laurie Piccolo, C/SCAA's executive director, said security guards staff the center at all times, helping ensure all visits and exchanges run safely and smoothly.

Along with hiring staff members and preparing the Auburn suite for clients, the consulting committee had to find ways to ensure victims would have no interaction with abusers.

"The center's primary goal is the safety of the victim and the children," Barnard explained.

And so, the committee came up with a system to prevent contact.

Following a court referral or self-referral, Barnard said custodial parents, non-custodial parents and children each undergo separate orientations with C/SCAA. They learn how the center works and sign agreements before starting visits or custody exchanges.

On the day of a visit or exchange, the non-custodial parent arrives at the center well before the custodial parent. While the visiting parent waits in one room, the custodial parent drops off the children using a separate entrance.

At the end of the visit, the custodial parent picks up the children and leaves while the non-custodial parent waits inside. After an undisclosed amount of time passes, the visiting parent is allowed to leave — preventing abusers from following their victims.

"That way, there's no interaction," Barnard said. "It really reduces the trauma the children have to go through."

Safe beginnings

Despite the grim reasons for its existence, C/SCAA's supervised visitation center is anything but dark.

Located in one wing of the Cayuga County Mental Health Center, the multiroom suite is bright, its clean-white walls colored with child friendly decals.

The main room — filled with a range of toys and books — looks like a child's dream recreation room. Although play sets and dolls are readily available for younger visitors, a large TV and Nintendo Wii gives parents with teenagers an age-appropriate way to connect.

A second, smaller room caters to parents with toddlers and infants. Complete with a rocking chair and crib, the cozy room looks and feels just like a residential nursery.

Vicky Meyers, director of the program, said she couldn't be happier with the new supervised visitation center.

"This is my dream," she said, smiling. "My dream come true."

Meyers worked at C/SCAA's old center in a dorm-room-sized suite inside Auburn's Metcalf Plaza, and is more than pleased with the center's new home.

She said the children — and parents — who have visited the new location so far have called the center "wonderful."

"They love it," she said. "They don't want to leave."

Safety, however, is still paramount. The center's windows are frosted, assuring privacy.

"No one can see in, no one can see out," Meyers said.

Although the staff members who supervise the visits try not to get involved, Barnard said they are trained to pick up on battering tactics — such as a visiting parent asking a child where they live or go to school.

Otherwise, the staff members keep their distance, allowing parents to enjoy time with their children in a safe environment.

"It takes the stress off the children," Meyers said. "Domestic violence impacts children so much."

C/SCAA's staff — always looking to help more people — has plans for the center's future.

Barnard said the agency continues to seek additional funding, which would allow the center to hire more staff members and see more families.

"We could have simultaneous visitors," she said. "That's our goal moving forward."

The agency has a second, overarching goal: ensuring enough funds are available to keep the only supervised visitation center in Cayuga County open — something Barnard said keeps families safe.

"Without a center like this, there's not a neutral party," she said. "That's an opportunity for a batterer to re-victimize."

C/SCAA's supervised visitation center

To learn more about the center, call (315) 255-1703 ext. 158.

Groups that donated to the center

- Cayuga County Defenders Group

- Zonta Club of Auburn
- Majorpalooza
- Kiwanis Club of Auburn
- Child Advocacy Center