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Abused kids'
well-being
at heart of
Children's
Assessment
Center's
new home



Karen Warren photos / Chronicle

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ROOM TO GLOW

Ellen Cokinos, executive director of the center, Harris County Judge Robert Eckels and Susan French look over the new playground equipment.



By **LESLIE SOWERS**
Houston Chronicle

The vivid green branches of a sculpted tree arch over the reception area, welcoming visitors to the new building for the Children's Assessment Center. An atrium playground needs a sign; "Caution - Romping Zone." And in the waiting area, an appealing array of toys invites children into the happy realm of play.

The bricks-and-mortar message of the new, \$10 million building comes through in crayon colors: Sexually abused children matter.

Reinforcing that message is the scheduled appearance today of first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, who will mark the official opening of the John M. O'Quinn Building at a noon ribbon cutting and ceremony for several hundred invited guests.

Unofficially, the 53,000-square-foot building opened its doors last week to the first of a sadly large number of clients. Telling the tale of sexual abuse, sometimes in little more than a whisper, takes its toll on young victims. Here, at least, they tell it only once.

And they tell it in a setting that has been designed to minimize the pain of disclosure, to foster their sense of safety and to immerse them in a healing environment from the moment they walk through the doors.

"Every little thing was designed with children in mind. They participated in the design. We really got a chance to think it through," said Ellen Cokinos, director of the CAC. The program and its building have been realized in large part through her leadership over more than a decade.

The CAC is a unique public-private partnership, and the collaboration of the multiple agencies involved has become a national and international model for such services. In its new building, it is the largest such center in the country.

Harris County Judge Robert Eckels attributes the accomplishment to the persistence of Cokinos, community volunteer Susan French and the center board.

"They have been tenacious in keeping the political and business leaders informed of their

Mary Benavides, a volunteer at the Children's Assessment Center, picks up toys in the children's waiting room at the Children's Assessment Center. First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton will officially open the John M. O'Quinn Building at noon today.

mission and vision," Eckels said. "They managed to get us to buy into it and to get us to help them expand it."

The new building represents the efforts of a broad spectrum of community leaders, he said, adding that it is hard to say no to the population the CAC serves.

"It has been a critical need for a long time," Eckels said.

Cokinos has worked with sexually abused children since 1985, when she began as a caseworker with Harris County Children's Protective Services. She has seen the number of cases reported grow exponentially. Only 40 cases were handled by CPS in 1980, while more than 5,000 were seen at the CAC last year.

As the field of knowledge about sexual abuse grew, child advocates began to realize that the very system that was supposed to help children added to their trauma by requiring that they tell their stories repeatedly to different agencies involved and to testify in court. Around the country, concerned professionals recognized that the system needed to change.

In 1990, Cokinos teamed with French, a former president of the Junior League, to obtain a grant to form the CAC, which would create a child-focused way to coordinate services and procedures. Negotiating cooperation across agencies and jurisdictions wasn't an easy process, Cokinos said.

"Once we were able to explain why there was a need for collaboration and the needs of these children, it all came together," French said.

Initially located within the CPS building and operating under its umbrella, the center streamlined procedures. Children were interviewed once by a trained professional who then shared information with participating agencies. In many cases, videotaped interviews convinced abusers to admit their wrongdoing, avoiding the necessity of a court case. Closely coordinated work among the agencies helps prevent abused children and their offenders from slipping through the cracks.

As the CAC demonstrated its success, it continued to grow. By 1994, the center had forged a partnership with seven public and private agencies with combined resources of more than 100 professionals, a support staff and 60 volunteers. Participating in the CAC team response are representatives from Child Advocates Inc.; Harris County Children's Protective Services; the Harris County Attorney's Office; Harris County District Attorney's Office; Harris County Sheriff's Office; Memorial Hermann Healthcare Systems; Houston Police Department; Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services; Interfaith Ministries/Youth Victim/Witness; and the University of Texas Health Science Center-Houston.

Cokinos said that once the agencies involved finally believed in the concept, the alliance began to work. As a result, the agencies were able to clear cases faster, serve more children and, by sharing offices, save space as well. In addition to the on-site interview, medical exam and therapeutic services, the center added innovative extras such as art therapy and volunteers who helped meet unrelated needs such as obtaining clothing or dental care.

When children disclose sexual abuse, they are brought to the center by CPS workers or the police. There they are interviewed and given a physical examination. If sexual abuse is confirmed, CPS determines if their home setting is safe. If it is not, they are taken into protective custody.

Plans for the new building were authorized in 1994 by Harris County Commissioners Court, which donated the land on which the building now sits. Cokinos, French and the center's board embarked on a \$10

million fund-raising campaign that has cut across many sectors of the community.

The center had become a collaborative effort between the county and the community, each contributing funds and expertise to help these children. Though it became a separate county department in 1995, the center receives about half its funding from the county and half through private fund raising.

Cokinos credits community philanthropies for being willing to go beyond assisting the more traditional arts or medical recipients to fund a cause that only a decade ago couldn't be talked about.

She is thrilled that passion and vision for the center has spread to the wider community and believes it will be a lasting gift to children in the area.

Cokinos is as enthusiastic about the smaller gifts as the larger contributions. Whether it's a \$30,000 piece of medical equipment or the painting of atrium murals by 17 Kinkaid High School students doing a service project, the gifts mean the community has embraced the children who have suffered this particularly painful abuse, she said.

Maureen O'Connell, who directs the center's therapeutic services, said one of the first young visitors came into the building with wide, appreciative eyes.

"This building is for you," she told the child. "This building was built for you."

Caring for children



First lady Hillary Rodham Clinton sits Monday with Ellen Cokinos, left, and Julie O'Quinn during the dedication of the Children's Assessment Center at 2500 Bolsover. The facility, the largest of its kind in the nation,

will treat and counsel children who have suffered from sexual abuse. Cokinos is the center's director, and O'Quinn's husband, John, donated \$1.5 million to the center's construction.

John Everett / Chronicle



John Everett / Chronicle

First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton tours the Children's Assessment Center playroom that is in the John O'Quinn building.

First lady hails center for children

By RAD SALLEE
Houston Chronicle

In the first of two Houston appearances Monday, first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton cut the ribbon on a new center designed to ease the ordeal of sexually abused children.

Afterward, she spoke at a luncheon for Democratic women at the Westin Galleria Hotel.

Clinton did not mention the current sexual allegations against her husband at either event, nor did she respond to questions on the subject.

Her first stop was a dedication ceremony for the John M. O'Quinn Building of the Children's Assessment Center, at 2500 Bolsover in The Village near Rice University.

The new, cheerful-looking three-story building will house 10 public and private agencies so that abused children may be treated, counseled and questioned by law enforcement personnel with a minimum of emotional stress and repetition.

Clinton spoke to about 300 persons who took shelter from the stormy weather under a tent.

"I've looked into the faces of many children who have been abused by those in whom they placed their trust and love," she said.

"There's no worse feeling in any human being's heart than to feel abandoned, neglected, un-

loved and unwanted."

But the legal process that some young victims must endure as cases of abuse are investigated and prosecuted often "adds another layer of anguish" that "further victimizes" them, Clinton said.

The new center — the largest of its kind in the nation — will "make this journey less painful," she said.

"I will take this message and spread it as widely as I can," Clinton promised.

"You will get many visitors," she predicted. "You should be so grateful to have a place like this in your community."

The building, erected on Harris County property, cost \$10.25 million. John O'Quinn, an attorney, donated \$1.5 million, the largest private gift.

The county and the city of Houston contributed community development

block grants of \$1.2 million and \$800,000, respectively.

In addition, there were donations of \$500,000 each from the Brown Foundation, the Cullen Trust for Healthcare, the Fondren Foundation, Houston Endowment Inc., the Kresge Foundation and the Vivian L. Smith Foundation, as well as a number of smaller gifts.

The center is a program of Harris County, responsible to Commissioners Court, but operates on a mix of public and private funds. It has existed since 1991, but never until now under one roof.

The current operating budget for the center is \$1.9 million. About half comes from taxes and the rest is raised by the center's support foundation, said assistant director Roz Hill.

The agencies working there provide another \$3.3 million worth of in-kind services, she said. They include the Houston Police Department, the Sheriff's Department, the county and district attorneys' offices, Children's

Protective Services, Child Advocates, Interfaith Ministries, the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services, the University of Texas Health Science Center and the Memorial/Hermann Health Care System.

O'Quinn's wife, Julie, accepted thanks on his behalf. Her husband, who is involved in the state's litigation against tobacco companies, could not attend, she said.

Center director Ellen Cokinos, who had pushed for such a facility for years, introduced Clinton. Cokinos' voice broke as she thanked donors and officials for making it a reality.

"For those who think dreams don't come true, I say, 'Look behind me!'" Cokinos said.

After the ceremony, Clinton went to the Westin Galleria Hotel for a luncheon of the Democratic National Committee Women's Leadership Forum, where she recounted the Clinton administration's goals and achievements and asked for the group's support.