



THINGS HAVE CHANGED IN TEXAS

by Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott

IN RECENT MONTHS, THERE HAVE BEEN many news stories resulting from cases – both nationally and here in Texas – which focus on the failures within our justice system in the investigation and prosecution of child abuse cases, particularly child sexual abuse, in the early 1980s and 90s. Like most Americans, I find myself heartbroken for the victims who did not receive the justice and healing they deserved, and equally troubled by instances involving wrongful convictions resulting from bad evidence, usually resulting from the compromised statement of a child victim or witness. However, I also find myself encouraged by the progress that has been made in the way that investigations are conducted and the modern day practices which have transformed this process.

Twenty years ago, it was not unusual for a child who had the courage to report abuse to endure interview after interview from well-meaning but often intimidating authority figures or untrained interviewers. As each

interviewer pursued a different class of evidence necessary to build a case, it was not unusual for eager-to-please children to adapt their stories to unintentional cues from interviewers, resulting in conflicting accounts and compromised cases against alleged perpetrators. Likewise, interviewers often had little professional training and support on how children make disclosures and recall experiences as there was simply little research in the field.

In today's Texas, when abuse is reported to authorities, the child will enter a collaborative network of care led by the 68 children's advocacy centers (CACs) working throughout our state. CACs provide a neutral hub where the efforts of law enforcement, Child Protective Services, prosecution and the medical and mental health community are integrated and coordinated. At the core of their efforts is a unique tool called the forensic interview.

Created to overcome the well-intentioned yet harmful mistakes from

the past, the forensic interview is conducted by experts specially trained in carefully researched techniques designed to elicit a coherent, non-leading, defensible account of the truth. Recorded on video, these interviews are utilized as evidence where they provide a consistent voice for the alleged victim throughout the legal process. There are currently over 100 professional interviewers employed at Texas CACs who undergo 40 hours of initial training prior to conducting their first interview, as well as ongoing peer review and annual continuing education. The positive impact on both the justice system and for these young victims has been nothing short of miraculous.

I am proud to say that this highly effective approach has not only been pioneered in Texas, but that the Attorney General's Office has provided critical funding and support for its development and implementation. Across the country, other states have eagerly followed the Texas example, adopting these

approaches and rescuing countless children from the horrors of abuse.

Despite our progress, there are still more than 40,000 Texas children who will enter a CAC this year due to alleged physical or sexual abuse, typically at the hands of a family member or friend. Fortunately, there are 68 CACs across Texas, leading the charge on accurately capturing their story and setting them on the path to justice and healing.

As we observe Child Abuse Awareness Month this April, I encourage all Texans to educate themselves on the warning signs of abuse so that children across our state will be heard when they courageously report. When the public knows that it's okay to report child abuse because the systems in place do in fact work fairly for all parties, we'll move one step closer towards eradicating crimes against children once and for all.

To learn more about the signs and symptoms of abuse, and to find your local CAC, visit www.onewithcourage.org.

- April 2014