

McLean County Family Visitation Center

McLean County is located in central Illinois about an hour northeast of Springfield. According to the US Census Bureau, the 2004 estimated population of McLean County is 158,006 with a land area of 1,184 square miles. In 2004, 182 Emergency Orders of Protection, 13 Interim Orders of Protection and 175 Plenary Orders of Protection were entered into the Law Enforcement Administrative Data System (LEADS).

The following information was gathered through an interview process with local key stakeholders describing the formation, procedures and needs of the McLean County Family Visitation Center. The following people were interviewed for the purpose of this report:

- **Teresa Kelly**, Program Director Family Support Services, *The Children's Foundation*
- **Bethany Wenger**, Family Visitation Center Coordinator, *The Children's Foundation*

Development of the McLean County Family Visitation Center

In 1999, the McLean County Domestic Violence Task Force, established in the mid 1990's, composed of community members, churches, the Sheriff's Department, the State's Attorney, victim advocates and partner abuse intervention service providers began exploring the issues of children in families with domestic violence and specifically the lack of safety during exchanges for both victims and their children. The Task Force determined the community needed a center that would allow for safe visitation exchanges that would help protect both children experiencing domestic violence and the victim.

The Task Force supported The Children's Foundation when they applied for, and received, a pilot grant from the Illinois Violence Prevention Authority (IVPA) to develop and implement a visitation exchange center. The McLean County Family Visitation Center opened September 1999 and currently serves seven families a month.

Program Administration

The Children's Foundation provides fiscal and personnel oversight for the McLean County Family Visitation Center.

Site/Location

The McLean County Family Visitation Center is located at the offices of The Children's Foundation in Bloomington. The facility has both a front and back entrance so parents arrive through separate entrances. The custodial parent uses the front entrance and the non-custodial parent uses the back entrance.

The Visitation Center is open from 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. Monday through Sunday where exchanges can occur at any time. The agency averages about 12 hours a week in exchanges.

Security

Security cameras are located in the McLean County Family Visitation Center parking lots, building hallways and in the visitation room. Parents are videotaped from the time of their arrival to the time of their departure. Parents are informed of the cameras during the intake interview and sign a form that they are aware of the cameras and that they are being videotaped.

There is a panic button on the wall and a portable panic button that is carried by the staff that notifies law enforcement immediately.

Funding

The Children's Foundation received funding for a pilot grant from IVPA for two years. They were notified by IVPA in May of 2001 that the McLean County Family Visitation Center would not be eligible for funding in fiscal year 2002 due to changes in prevention criteria used by IVPA. With the loss of this funding, the Foundation's board of directors began a fundraising effort. The Foundation received a one time grant from the county for \$10,000 in 2003 as well as a two year federal Safe Havens Grant in October 2004. The Foundation is reapplying for Safe Havens funding for 2006-2008.

Additional funding is generated from intake fees and exchanges. The non-custodial parent is charged a \$25.00 intake fee and each parent is charged \$5.00 per exchange, collected at the time of the exchange. In cases of financial hardship, a family can write a letter to the Visitation Center requesting a fee waiver or fee reduction. Staff determines if a waiver is granted on a case-by-case basis.

Staffing

The McLean County Visitation Center is staffed with social workers employed by The Children's Foundation. Typically, one staff person is scheduled for exchanges, but if there are exchanges scheduled where either of the parents are exhibiting certain risk factors, additional staff will be added. The Visitation Center also has students in the Masters of Social Work program from Illinois State University who assist with exchanges.

During their first year at the Foundation, new staff, volunteers and interns complete a 15 hour training course covering stages of child development, the effects of divorce, family violence including intimate partner abuse, child abuse, and mandated reporting for child abuse. Annually, ten hours of continuing education training is provided for staff.

Protocols/Procedures

Types of cases

A court order is not required in order to use the McLean County Family Visitation Center but families must have been or are experiencing domestic violence, physical abuse, sexual abuse, or stalking. Referrals may come from the court, attorneys, shelters and other social service agencies or as a self-referral from the family.

Procedures

Intake

Both parents are required to schedule an intake assessment before the Visitation Center will begin providing supervised exchanges:

- The parents are interviewed individually and the following information is covered:
- A Client Fact Sheet that includes the names of parents, contact information and the names of the children.

- A Legal Information Form that includes information on any current or expired orders of protection, court orders for visitation, docket numbers and the names of any judges presiding over cases between the parties and the attorneys representing them.
- A social history that contains any family history of violence.
- The guidelines for using the Visitation Center.
- Each parent signs a form indicating that they have received the rules of the Visitation Center, an Informed Consent to Participate in Services, the Statement of Confidentiality, the Clients Rights Statement, and the Appeal/Grievance Policy for Persons Served.

Exchange Process

- The non-custodial parent arrives 10 minutes before the exchange and enters through the rear entrance.
- The custodial parent arrives at the designated time of the exchange through the front entrance.
- The staff will bring the child to the non-custodial parent who is waiting in the visitation room.
- The non-custodial parent will wait 15 minutes with the child while the custodial parent leaves the building.
- When returning the non-custodial parent and child arrive 15 minutes before the exchange.
- The custodial parent arrives at the designated time of the exchange, picks up the child and leaves.
- The non-custodial parent waits 15 minutes and then leaves.

Records and Reporting

The Visitation Center provides reports to the court on a quarterly basis. The reports include a summary of the services provided, reasons for cancellation of an exchange, no shows, observations and concerns of the staff and recommendations if appropriate. Reports are filed more frequently if there is a pressing issue. The reports filed with the court are also sent to the clients and their attorneys.

Other Services Provided

The Children's Foundation is a child welfare agency and part of Children's Home & Aid Society of Illinois. Services available include supervised visitation, transportation to and from visits, parenting/child groups, therapy, and an on-site crisis nursery.

Data Collection

Due to the fact that the McLean County Family Visitation Center is funded by Safe Havens, the Visitation Center uses a required database from the Department of Justice that includes demographic information, reasons for referrals, family issues and the number of exchanges.

Advisory Committee

The McLean County Family Visitation Center has an advisory committee that meets quarterly. The role of this committee is to advise the program on policies and programming as they relate to the Visitation Center. The committee includes representation from the following groups: women's advocates, child abuse services, Illinois State University School of Social Work, family

law attorneys, legal services, family law division judges, physicians, the state's attorney's office, child protection, law enforcement and court administration.

Promotion/Marketing

A brochure on the McLean County Family Visitation Center is distributed to judges, attorneys and service providers. The Visitation Center hosts annual trainings for judges, attorneys and law enforcement.