

Awareness helps stop child abuse

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WELLAND

Ending child abuse comes down to community awareness and resolve.

"Awareness is really a big part of the problem," says Ann Godfrey, director of development for Family and Children Services (FACS) Niagara.

"Child abuse is not a pleasant topic, but you can't begin to address the problem until you recognize that it exists."

October is Child Abuse Prevention Month and to raise awareness of the problem FACS Niagara, the local Children's Aid Society, is taking part in the 12th annual Purple Ribbon Campaign.

"We all have a responsibility to protect our community's children," says Bill Charron, executive director of FACS. "Last year alone we responded to more than 5,300 child protection concerns and conducted 3,438 investigations into possible abuse and neglect of children living here in our community."

While FACS' central office is located in St. Catharines, its child protection services in south Niagara operate out of offices located on South Pelham Road in Welland.

The Welland office handles intake calls from Wainfleet, Port Colborne, Pelham, Fort Erie and parts of Thorold, says Anna Bozza, assistant director of service in Welland.

The current Welland building was constructed in 1994, but child protection services have been provided from



STAFF PHOTO ANGUS SCOTT

Child protection supervisor Susan May, left, talks over a case with Anna Bozza, assistant director of service at the Welland Family and Children's Services office. October is Child Abuse Prevention Month.

the same site for decades.

"Welland as a community has been very good to the CAS," says Godfrey.

Strong support from service clubs like Rotary, from the businesses in the community such as Canadian Tire Financial, has been consistent over the years.

The Welland site also hosts the only youth residential program run by FACS Niagara.

Twenty beds, located in two separate units, provides FACS with a site to house children who have nowhere else to go.

"This site allows us to get a handle on what issues these kids are facing

and to stabilize them so we can move them to a foster home or back to their own home," says Bozza.

The usual age of children staying at the regional adolescent centre is nine to 10 years old, says Bozza.

The Welland office carries out investigations in its coverage area. The number of calls fluctuates depending on the time of year, says Bozza.

"We often see spikes after holidays, like Thanksgiving and Christmas," she says.

Calls are generally divided into two classifications - those where a child may be at imminent risk, and less dangerous situations.

THE FACTS

What Can You Do?

- Report any concerns you have about a child in need
- Parent wisely, discipline doesn't have to hurt
- Seek help if you need it, nobody is perfect
- Empower your children so they are less likely to be victimized
- Be a volunteer or a foster parent
- Donate to a helping agency
- Wear a purple ribbon and increase awareness

The Welland office gets at least one call per day that requires immediate attention.

"On a recent day, we had four of those types of calls," says Bozza.

Calls come from a variety of sources within the community, be it teachers, police, doctors or the parents themselves.

Staff work in family service teams, with seven members on each of the three Welland teams.

Godfrey says FACS only takes children into custody as a last resort. "And many cases that do result in the child being taken into care occur with parent consultation," she says.

PLEASE SEE ADDICTION/A4

Addiction, poverty major issues in Welland

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Quite often a parent realizes situations are getting out of control and seeks help from FACS.

"Things get away from all of us," says Godfrey.

"I think everyone wants to be a good parent. But parenting is tough, life is tough. Nobody's perfect and people have a reasonable expectation of help."

Workers from the Welland office are seeing a number of issues within the community, says child welfare supervisor Denise Collins.

"We are seeing a lot of addictions issues," she said.

"But poverty is also a big issue in the Welland area, with the plants closing down. Parents are under a lot of stress right now."

FACS' aim is to help parents cope, to act as a preventative agency instead of just being reactive, says Godfrey. It offers parenting courses and programs aimed at achieving this objective.

At the end of the day, protecting children is a responsibility all of us share, says Godfrey.

It is a legal requirement in Ontario for residents to report abuse.

"It's not an expectation that everyone be on a witch hunt," says Godfrey, "but at the same time at some level everyone has a duty to report. It's not about projecting your values on to everyone else. It's about ensuring that community standard is met."

Even the common situation of a young child being left alone in a vehicle could pose a risk. "Should you call that one in?" says Godfrey. "It depends. If you're sitting there for 10 minutes and nobody shows up, that's pretty concerning. Who knows how long that child was there before you arrived?"

Bozza says that FACS would rather address issues without opening case files, through the provision of resources.

"The families we deal with are not

bad people generally," says Godfrey. "They're no different to you or I, but they are having some difficulty managing. Protecting children comes down to people in the community, people who are not scared to become involved."

For more information about FACS Niagara and the Purple Ribbon Campaign, call 905-888-937-7731.