

# New guidelines for child trafficking survivors consist of longterm care

By Sara Samora | The Herald-Zeitung Jun 28, 2019

The children advocacy center was created under the Texas Family Code as a neutral child-friendly agency. It unites members of the community to combat child sex trafficking such as law enforcement, the district attorney and other organizations assisting survivors of child sex trafficking. They're known as the multidisciplinary team. **File photo**

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The Multidisciplinary Team of Comal County added a new guideline to help combat child sex trafficking on Wednesday.

The new guideline aims to help child trafficking survivors over the long term by restore their sense of wellbeing.

The change comes from the request of Governor Greg Abbott's child sex trafficking team. In April, the CSTT released new guidelines for the state's MDTs to instill in their practice of advocating victims of child sex trafficking.

Trendy Sharp, executive director of the Children's Advocacy Center of Comal County, Inc., said the partners signed to bring in a new member and approved the process change that included the addition of longterm advocacy.

The state's child sex trafficking team created a roadmap to achieve five goals:

- Protect children from sexual exploitation
- Help the public recognize signs of sexual exploitation
- Help victims recover
- Restore their sense of wellbeing
- Bring justice to those who exploit children.

Sharp said the MDT have always worked on child trafficking cases in Comal County, but the team guideline change was due to the governor's office's suggestion of looking at these special types of cases, and seeing if there are things they could do to improve the way they work with these victims.

"So we did, and we came up with some great new folks that we wanted to invite in to our inner agency, including a piece that will handle longterm advocacy for these victims," Sharp said.

She added that these victims are different than most sexual abuse victims, in that they have experienced traumatic abuse, and that they are consistently a set of victims that do not trust the system.

“They’ve been disappointed over and over again; they’ve been manipulated and exploited,” she said. “So, having someone step in and to be with them, be responsible for them, on the longterm advocacy piece was really important, and that’s what we were missing, in terms of what services we are providing to these kids.”

Thus, an organization called Common Thread was invited to come on board and provide the longterm services.

According to the Common Thread website, CT is a project of BCFS Health and Human Services, which is a global system of nonprofit organizations throughout the world. CT is an advocacy for victims of human trafficking in Central Texas, Greater Houston and the Rio Grande Valley and border.

The MDT was established in 2005. Under the Texas Family Code, the Children’s Advocacy Center of Comal County was created to be a neutral child-friendly agency specializing in bringing a team that also includes the district attorney, law enforcement and other organizations dedicated to helping victims of child sex trafficking.

For Comal County, the team consist of the CACCC, Common Thread, District Attorney Jennifer Tharpe, law enforcement of Garden Ridge, New Braunfels and Comal County, the Department of Family and Protective Services, the Crisis Center of Comal County, Connections and the Court-Appointed Special Advocates of Central Texas.

Prior to 2005, Sharp said the community was doing a great job on child abuse cases, but everyone was doing their own thing.

“We weren’t sharing information, and we weren’t saving money, and we certainly weren’t preventing trauma for the families and the kids who had to keep going to place after place to be interviewed and talk about the facts of what happened,” she said.

The CAC was created to be a child-friendly environment for kids to visit as few times as possible. There, they speak with a forensic interviewer, telling him or her what happened, and the interview is filmed so the child may only have to speak about the experience once, or as few times as possible. The video is then presented in court.

Part of the whole system and collaboration includes a case review meeting, which is done monthly.

“We talk about every case that goes through the CAC, and the DA’s office, and law enforcement, and DPS, and all the rest of the team members would participate in the process behind the scenes more than making the kids go upfront and making them interview over and over again,” Sharp said.

## **Types of Trafficking**

“I think a lot of people in the community might have ideas of what child sex trafficking is, that somebody gets snatched up and put in a huge semi-truck and gets taken, and sometimes it happens like that,” Sharp said.

The governor’s roadmap states the definition of child sex trafficking under Texas law includes a variety of types of exploitation.

“Child sex trafficking occurs when a person knowingly (regardless of whether the actor knows the age of the child at the time of the offense):

- Traffics a child under the age of 18 and causes by any means the child to engage in or become the victim of commercial sex acts or child sex abuse.
- Receives a benefit from participating in a venture that involves child sex trafficking
- Engages in sexual conduct with a trafficked child.

One example would be a mother offering her child to a drug dealer in exchange for drugs.

“There have been cases that have come through and it’s a child being put in a situation by a parent or family member, and then bought or sold for different things,” Sharp said. “That’s common, it happens. And just think, the people that are supposed to look after you and love you the most have participated in a terrible, egregious thing that you have to deal with for the rest of your life. It is the way that some of the trafficking cases happen.”

With Common Thread, Sharp said they check up with the survivors and ensure them that they’re always available in innovative ways that kids are used to communicating with adults, such as using social media.

“They really keep in touch with them longterm by talking to them in a way that’s meaningful for those victims,” Sharp said. “They’re really good at that sort of thing, they’ve been working out of Texas for quite some time

and they have some great experience in this type of advocacy and keeping in touch with these people.”

To report the sexual exploitation of a child, called the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888. The line is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week and is confidential.