

Kids' center up and running

Move into new facility was slowed by storm

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LEESBURG

Officials with the Lake-Sumter Children's Advocacy Center planned for months to move into their new 32,000 square foot facility last Friday and even had volunteers lined up to help, but Hurricane Charley changed those plans.

Many of the volunteers — firemen and police officers — instead found themselves planning for a possible Lake County disaster, leaving workers with the advocacy cen-

ter to move things in themselves.

"We're operating out of the new place right now," said Executive Director Diane Piszczek. "All of our stuff is not here yet, but we have enough things to operate out of here."

Piszczek said the advocacy center, which previously was in Tavares, moved to Leesburg after the land for the new building was donated.

"We were renting the facility in Tavares," she said. "It was functional for us for a long time, but it was not set up to be the kind of facility we wanted, which was child-friendly."

It is important that the center be child-friendly because officials at the advocacy

center work with children who have been physically or sexually abused. The center counsels children, provides a safe spot for families with children in foster care working toward reunification and does forensic interviews of abused children.

The new center houses three interview rooms and a play therapy room and will soon offer pet therapy. A nurse practitioner from the University of Florida works on site, providing medical exams if necessary. All the services provided at the center are free.

Each of the interview rooms has a video camera, so sessions can be taped, and police officers and other personnel associated with Kids Central Inc. and the Department

of Children and Families can watch from another room.

"Often the tape can be used in court, so the child only has to tell the story once," Piszczek said.

Officials spent a year and a half raising \$400,000 to build the new facility. Landscaping was donated, as were some other services.

"The community has been tremendously supportive of us," Piszczek said. "We were grateful recipients of a lot of donations. This would not have been possible without a lot of people believing in what we do here and supporting it."

An open house at the center is being planned for September.