



PHOTOS BY TOM BENITEZ/ORLANDO SENTINEL

Nonintrusive approach. Jamie Barrett, clinical supervisor at the Lake/Sumter Children's Advocacy Center, prepares for sand tray therapy with a client. The center helps kids victimized by sexual abuse.

Gentleness key for abused kids

Advocacy center filled with soft edges

By **SHERRI M. OWENS**

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LEESBURG — Moving boxes are still arriving, waiting to be unpacked, but Diane Piszczek has no time to waste.

Early this week she saw three children come in for medical examinations, three for counseling sessions and two for forensic interviews.

“And that was just Monday and Tuesday,” Piszczek, director of the Lake/Sumter Children’s Advocacy Center, said Wednesday. “There will be more.”

From the colorful flowers that line the front porch to the stuffed animals, fish tank and lighthearted videotapes in the



An improvement. The new Leesburg location for the Children’s Advocacy Center, recently finished, is about 14 percent larger than the old one.

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Child advocacy center has roomier new digs

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waiting room, the homey appearance belies the seriousness of what happens inside.

The nonprofit center, which relocated to a new building in Leesburg this week, provides counseling and conducts forensic interviews of abused children for use as evidence in trials. It also offers a neutral place for "monitored exchanges" — when one parent drops off a child to be picked up by the other parent for a visit — and for parents who are allowed only supervised visits to spend time with their children.

"It looks like home and it's supposed to," Piszczek said, having walked past the faux fireplace, plush denim chairs and casual oak dining set in the front visitation room to get to her new office. "We wanted something child-friendly and unthreatening."

The center opened in 1998 in Eustis, later moved to Tavares and recently completed construction on a 3,200-square-foot, \$400,000 facility at 300 Canal St. in Leesburg.

Along with Lake and Sumter counties, 30 other Florida counties are served by Children's Advocacy Centers. They include Brevard, Marion, Orange, Osceola, Polk, Seminole and Volusia, where the first Florida center opened in 1994. The centers are part of a statewide network that works to improve Florida's response to child abuse in general and sexual abuse in particular, while minimizing trauma to children and families.

The building is about 14 percent larger than the old one in Tavares, which was 2,800 square feet. But the real advantage is how the new space is used, Piszczek said.

There is a room for play therapy, where children communicate their feelings using toys. Pet therapy will be added soon. The center already has Shepp, a rescued greyhound trained for the job.

"Children can get and give unconditional acceptance and love from an animal," Piszczek said. "It doesn't matter if the child is upset and crying; the animal is trained to stay calm and lay there so the child can pet him."

The three rooms designated for forensic interviews are equipped with discreetly positioned video cameras so detectives and lawyers can watch from a separate room to ensure they get the information they need for court.

Each room will have a different theme — fish, bears or kites — along with a comfy loveseat for the child and a small upholstered stool for the counselor "so they can get down on the child's level," Piszczek said.

In the old building, all the counselors were in one big room. Now they each have their own offices. Also in the old building, children who came in for exams or interviews would wait in the same area where parental visitations were. Now the two are separate.

"The child's comfort is first and foremost," Piszczek said. "We want the least anxiety-producing way to do this."

If statistics from past years hold any clues, the demand for the center's services are likely to increase.

More of the abuse cases brought to the center are sex-related these days, she said, and there is a growing number of child-on-child cases. Last year, the center helped 421 children, up from 392 the year before.

"Counselors go out into the preschools and teach classes on good-touch and bad-touch and on how to recognize and prevent child abuse," Piszczek said. "I'd like to be optimistic and say we're seeing more children because people are better educated now about what to look for. I hope that's why."

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