

## CHILD PROTECTION PERSPECTIVE

### **[Brad Penner/Reporting]**

For too many Nebraska children the joyful noise of childhood was silenced too soon. Since 1997, more than 30 children have died from abuse. For awhile, no one paid much attention, but eventually the faces of these lost children cried out for action. A task force met to study the cases and recommend changes in Nebraska's child protection system. They issued a report and Governor Mike Johanns persuaded the legislature to act.

### **[Gov. Mike Johanns]**

LB1089 will bring about the most sweeping effort, the most sweeping reform of our child protection system that our state has probably ever seen.

### **[Penner/Reporting]**

To get an idea what reform is all about, we visited a place where a yellow submarine covered with cuddly creatures fills the lobby. It's a place in Omaha called Project Harmony.

### **[Gene Klein/Project Harmony]**

The intent was to create a one-stop center that investigators and child protective service workers would be supported by services such as forensic interviews and medical exams.

### **[Penner/Reporting]**

Gene Klein is director of Project Harmony. He says they served 715 children last year. Eighty per cent of the cases involved sexual abuse. Project Harmony is a child advocacy center, one of several created to improve the way the system handled child sexual abuse cases. Today, a specially trained doctor examines 40 to 50 suspected victims every month. She uses an instrument that videotapes the exam for use as evidence if necessary.

### **[Klein]**

The first is to get good information and accurate information. The second is to gather it in a way that can be used in court. So we're collecting it and preserving the evidence with the intention of it being used in court if that's needed. And then the third and probably the most important is to reduce the trauma to the child.

### **[Penner/Reporting]**

Suzie Mistry interviews suspected victims of child sexual abuse. A camera in the corner sends the interview next door.

**[Suzie Mistry/Child Interview Specialist]**

It works wonderfully cause we have the interview rooms that we use for the kids and then we have the observation rooms where the investigators can observe the interviews as they take place. And sometimes kids will ask us too well why is the camera there. And we'll just explain to them that it's there so that we don't have to have them come back here again and answer all those questions all over again.

**[Penner/Reporting]**

The kids know people in the room next door watch and record the interview. Usually a police investigator and a child protective services worker monitor the interview together.

**[Mistry]**

And so a lot of it's about just finding that connection with the kids, understanding them enough to know what, you know, what they might say, what they're meaning, their wording, and that in turn, I think, presents good information that investigators are able to use for, you know, for their investigations.

**[Klein]**

What happens in a sexual abuse case because we coordinate that here at Project Harmony, law enforcement and child protective service workers come together and look at the same information and are making some critical decisions immediately after the forensic interview with a medical exam. The beauty of this is that the right people are sitting down and talking about this. We think that that process will be replicated in the neglect cases or in the other physical abuse cases.

**[Penner/Reporting]**

The Project Harmony facility brought together the Omaha Police Department's Juvenile Victim's Unit and Child Protective Services workers.

**[Kathy Lang, CPS Supervisor]**

Project Harmony has made all the difference in the world to the way we do our jobs, the way they do their jobs, and the way children are treated.

**[Penner/Reporting]**

Kathy Lang supervises initial assessment workers who investigate reports of child abuse. She says working in the same building with police investigators made a huge difference.

**[Lang]**

I've been doing this for a lot of years and before we moved to Harmony we were not located together, we didn't work together, we didn't trust each other, we saw them as just wanting to arrest parents who needed help. They saw us as bleeding heart social workers. We didn't communicate well at all.

**[Penner/Reporting]**

Sargent Teresa Thorson worked on the Child Victim Unit before it moved into the Project Harmony facility. She too has seen a change in attitude.

**[Sargent Theresa Thorson/Omaha Police Department]**

When Child Protective Services or a social worker used to call us regarding a case, we felt that they were interfering, what's it to them, this is my case, I make the decisions, how dare they question me or ask me, but it seems, once you get to know each other and it's not just a voice on the phone, now it's a person face to face that you're talking with that's you come to a more understanding and you understand more what their job is too.

**[Klein]**

Again, we're trying to break down the barriers between law enforcement and Child Protective Services so that when they have those tough cases and they really need to be at the table together, they're able to do that and know each other and understand where each other might be coming from.

**[Penner/Reporting]**

That same concept is a key part of child protection reform.

**[Johanns]**

LB 1089 funds case coordinators who will lead the charge at each of the child advocacy centers.

**[Kim Hawekotte/Deputy Douglas County Attorney]**

Which I see as a position to help at what we call the upfront of the system. The cases before they're filed with the court, to help with the investigation, to make sure that law enforcement is sharing the information with the department, and vice versa. That if the department has information, they're sharing it with law enforcement so that all this information can be accumulated and passed on to the County Attorney's office to make decisions and also to all the other entities.

**[Penner/Reporting]**

Deputy Douglas County Attorney Kim Hawekotte served on the Child Death Task Force. The Task Force noticed that too often, information known by police or Child Protective Services wasn't known by the other agency. The coordinators won't work for the state or law enforcement. They'll be hired by the non-profit child advocacy centers. Their task is to help local law enforcement work with local caseworkers.

**[Hawekotte]**

So yes, I think it can be done. It just might not be as formal as we are lucky enough to have it here at Project Harmony, but it's the exact same concept that I think you can do throughout the state and that was the hope of the task force and through the legislation that that will be set up through the coordinators.

**[Penner/Reporting]**

Lancaster County Attorney Gary Lacey co-chaired the task force. He says the coordinators need to be on board soon.

**[Gary Lacey/Lancaster County Attorney]**

One thing I think has to be done and that is to make sure that as we organize the process, the new process around advocacy centers, that accountability be paramount. Somebody has to be accountable when a child dies.

**[Penner/Reporting]**

The reform plan also provides more than 5-million dollars to high 80 more child protection caseworkers and 40 supervisors, aides, and intake workers. That should help reduce caseloads to a more manageable level.

**[Lang]**

You can't do the kind of hands-on work you need to do to help families change, if you have so many families that you're just running around responding to crises. So I think the workers will help a lot.

**[Penner/Reporting]**

Kim Hawekotte counts on caseworkers to help her decide what court action to pursue in the interest of children.

**[Hawekotte]**

What has happened here in Douglas County, at least, is the caseloads for ongoing case managers and initial assessment workers have been so high they don't have the adequate time in

which to spend to get all the information that I as an attorney and most of the system really needs to make good and fair decisions.

**[Abuse/Neglect Hotline]**

Abuse/Neglect Hotline. This is Lucy. How may I help you.

**[Penner/Reporting]**

The Douglas County Child Abuse Hotline is also answered at Project Harmony.

**[Project Harmony intake worker]**

And how would you spell that.

**[Penner/Reporting]**

Intake workers started asking more questions a few months ago. The goal is to gather more information about the reported situation. The new procedures resulted in three times more referrals. Lange says in recent months they hired more caseworkers to handle the increased workload. It's now around 300 families per month.

**[Lang]**

In getting that more detailed information, we're finding that there are a lot more families that we need to be going out on, to see what is happening within the family.

**[Penner/Reporting]**

Recent reports in the Omaha World-Herald provided rare insight into one of the child death cases. The reports examined the actions of nearly all who played a role in the child's life and ultimately death. The series raised questions about the actions and at times, inaction, of those who work in the system, including a child protective services worker. Kathy Lang says the stories hurt.

**[Lang]**

I know all the people who worked on those cases and I have to say I think that the articles have been pretty unfair to those workers.

**[Klein]**

These are people that care a lot about children. When a severe injury happens or a child dies, everyone in this building feels that pain.

**[Lang]**

We do everything we can to make children safe, but we can't predict human behavior, and I guess to hear yourself maligned or

that you could have done and didn't when people second guess themselves all the time and it's very demoralizing.

**[Klein]**

What we need to remember is it's not the worker that didn't do their job. It's the system that hasn't done its job.

**[Mary Jo Pankoke/Task Force Co-Chair]**

Keeping kids safe in Nebraska takes all of us. It can't be done by law enforcement and protection of these staff alone. It takes all Nebraskans for their leadership and .....

**[Penner/Reporting]**

That's why the reform plan includes more training for law enforcement and medical workers.

**[Hotline worker]**

And does everyone in the family speak English?

**[Penner/Reporting]**

But it also means we all have a responsibility to pick up the phone.

**[Klein]**

Either we don't call because we haven't seen enough or that we think that Child Protective Services is gonna ask us to prove whether or not the child's being abused or neglected. And that's not the case. It's really if you suspect, you need to call. The more people that call with good information, the likely they're gonna be able to have a solid case and be able to investigate it.

**[Penner/Reporting]**

More workers, better information, coordinated investigations all may help protect Nebraska's kids. But child advocates agree more needs to be done and they'll ask the Governor and legislature to continue reforming the system next year. Reporting for Statewide, I'm Brad Penner.