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Facing Horror of Child Abuse With Action

By: Lynn Simross

We see the horror stories almost weekly:

- In Chicago, a 9 year-old child jumped out of a window to his death being beaten by the man who lives with his mother.
- In Cheyenne, Wyo., a psychologist recommended using cattle prods to control excessive behavior of retarded children.
- In Long Beach, a 16 year-old girl was found suffering from malnutrition, having been locked in her room for two years, allegedly by her parents.

We read the figures:

- Somewhere between 1 and 4 million children under age 18 are physically abused, neglected or sexually molested each year in the United States.
- Estimates are that 34,000 to 136,000 children are similarly abused annually in Los Angeles County alone.
- According to the L.A. Coroner's Office, death due to abuse and neglect of children up to 10 increased 100% in 1973: another 50% in 1974

People who abuse, beat, molest, or neglect children are, everyone agrees, sick. We ensure them, fine them, and put them in jail. And we say, collectively, we are a society in which children come first.

"That is a myth. A complete myth," says Dr. Kerby Alvy, 37, a Los Angeles psychologist who started the Center for the Improvement of Child Caring 2 ½ years ago. "It is not true that nothing is too good for our children. We don't support parents, train them. And there are very few, if any, organizations in this county designed to prevent people from abusing children."

That's where Alvy and the CICC come in. He and other professional psychologists and sociologists and lay members spent long hours testifying before committees, talking with community organizations, asking the county board of supervisors for money to begin such a preventative service.

And on July 13, CICC received a \$108,000 grant from the county out of federal revenue-sharing funds to establish the Child Abuse Information Center for residents of L.A. County. It was not as much money as they wanted. But it's a satisfying start. Now, instead of trying to get CICC programs started out of his home, Alvy has an office, Suite 507 at 3727 W. Sixth St., and a small staff.

More importantly the staff runs a hotline service for information on child abuse and referrals for people who call in from 9 to 5. After hours, a three-minute recording tells callers where to go for immediate assistance in life-threatening child abuse crises or where to seek information the next day. Callers may also leave a message at the 384-2101 number.

Children calling in after 5 are referred to 666-1015, an adolescent and youth hotline. "We had hoped," says Alvy, "for enough money to have 24-hour person-to-person service. But that will have to come later."

Calls Increasing Each Week

Information about CICC, a non-profit organization, is available at 384-4834.

Hotline calls have been increasing steadily each week since July, says Alvy, as "more and more people learn of us." Members of the staff check back with callers in a week or two "to see if they got what they needed," he adds.

"Do you know that there was no direct number in the L.A. phonebook for people to call concerning

child abuse?" Alvy asks. These services were all under different units in the county. Now the operators give people our number."

Though Alvy and his staff are getting "more and more walk-ins," they also are going out to the public. They have films and members of CICC volunteer their time to PTAs, church groups and civic organizations to discuss child abuse and neglect and ways to preventing them.

"We're actually looking for community groups to talk with," explains Alvy. "There is a great need to make people aware. The hotline and public presentations have two major purposes: to increase public awareness, public education, and to assist the public in knowing what to do about child abuse and neglects."

Although Alvy has no children, he has "been involved with kids and awful long time." He proudly talks of his own family (there are five children), who moved here from New York when he was 4 years old; of his 13 nieces and nephews, and of his siblings' involvement in CICC. "My brother (Daniel) is on the board of trustees," Alvy says. "And there are a whole lot of concerned and committed people in this. We would never have been able to start without committed people."

Alvy, a graduate of UCLA who received his Ph.D. in clinical psychology from the State University of New York in Albany, has an impressive background in children's services. He is a consultant of children's services to the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare and project director at Kedren Community Mental Health Center in Watts, a federally-backed program that trains parents in delivering child mental health services.

He became so busy and involved trying to start CICC that he gave up private practice, but continues to teach at the California School of Professional Psychology. Previously, he taught courses in child development, parenting and child abuse at UCLA and Cal State L.A.

Alvy volunteers as executive director of CICC and as director of the Child Abuse Information Center.

Actually, Alvy started CICC shortly after he testified before a state Senate select committee on child development and child abuse in December, 1974. "I was contacted by a local foundation in the Valley," he explains. The man asked me, "If money was not an issue, what would you do to prevent child abuse and neglect?"

"Nobody had ever asked me that before," adds Alvy. I thought about it and it took me two weeks to come up with the concept of CICC. It is membership based (the organization started with 25 people, grew to 100 the first year and now number more than 300 in 14 states). That is the source of our financial support. Like the ACLU and Common Cause."

Necessary to Keep Pushing

And like the American Civil Liberties Union and Common Cause, CICC exists to keep its cause -- prevention of child abuse -- in the public mind.

"We are a reactive society," says Alvy. "We react to problems when they come to our attention. We don't focus on prevention. And if groups like CICC don't keep pushing, if they aren't there to keep reminding people, then people forget."

Dr. Kerby Alvy stays late in his office this evening, talking with his visitors. He is there most days, taking a few hours out to tend to his other duties, and spends "a lot of weekends" working on CICC programs.

"This child abuse information thing is the first of a dream," he says with a smile. "The other things we want to do are for parents, parent development service center, information center."

Alvy talks of developing model programs in different communities for parents and for children. He hopes for CICC chapters in other states where there are members, but no organized CICC groups. "There is very little focus on care givers, the people responsible for taking care of kids. It is not just parenting we're talking about but everyone concerned with children. Teachers, other family members, lawyers who deal with child custody cases, policemen, elected officials."

Three Basic Problems

He continues, in a soft voice, speaking of problems, programs, and types of child abuse. "There are

three basic ones,” he says, “physical-the battering of infants, the full range of horrors; neglect-not providing physical and or emotional care; sexual-raping kids. There is individual abuse, institutional abuse.

“And the kids who are abused pay us back in some way,” he adds. “We pay dearly. People don’t think about that. Children suffer brain damage and become mentally retarded or emotionally disturbed. Our tax money has to take care of them.

“Or they become delinquent, drug users, criminals, alcoholics.” Alvy produces books and papers concerning child abuse. “Almost all of our assassins have a history of being abused as kids. Even Booth.”

Pulling more studies from his file, he goes on, “As we learn more about the characteristics of rapists, there are indications a good number of them were sexually abused as children.

“And the cycle continues; there is a pretty good likelihood that if a child was abused, when he becomes a parents he will abuse when he becomes a parent he will abuse his children.”

“We make a terrible mistake,” Alvy says tossing his paper on his desk in disgust, “We think children are the property of their parents. They are not.

“They are in the care of their parents at this time. But how they are reared concerns us all. We are all influenced by how they are raised. Children are the responsibility of all of us. But they and their parents are low on the list of priorities.”

Alvy leans back in his chair, shaking his head slowly. “Listen,” he says. “Do you know how many children there are in this county alone? 2,268,000-the next generation. What can be more important than raising them?”

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