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ALERT CENTERPIECE

Room offers safe space for kids before court

Heather Mullinix
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Cumberland County Mayor Allen Foster, left, and Cumberland County Sheriff Casey Cox discuss the new Comfort Corn courtroom 1 in the Cumberland County Justice Center. The room offers a safe space for children waiting to testify in cc

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Children who must testify in court will have a safe space to wait and prepare for their turn on the witness stand with the creation of a Comfort Corner outside courtroom 1 in the Cumberland County Justice Center.

Sgt. Gary Howard, public information officer for the Cumberland County Sheriff's Office, said until now, the only place for children to wait to be called into court was a wooden bench in the hallway outside the courtrooms.

He recalled a case that involved several students from a local school.

"They sit out there on those benches and are passed by the other people," Howard said. "You can imagine how intimidating and fearful it was to see the people who were going to be testified against right out here."

The Comfort Corner is tucked away, with comfortable seating, soft lighting, books, toys and games — all designed to help children focus less on the stress of going into court and sharing their story.

"They can get comfortable so that, when they get on the stand, it's not so intimidating," said Howard, who also oversees the School Resource Officers in Cumberland County Schools.

The space was among one of the first ideas identified by the Cumberland County Trauma Informed Community Alliance when it formed in April 2021.

"We wanted a trauma-sensitive room at the courthouse," said Colleen Mall, a Fairfield Glade Rotary Club member who helped bring the community together for the launch of the alliance. "This was recommended by now-Judge [Amanda] Worley and Judge [Caroline] Knight as something that was needed."

Both Worley and Knight previously worked as prosecutors with the 13th Judicial District Attorney General's Office.

Mall said Rotary Family and Youth Initiative provided two rounds of grant funding for the space.

“It was a small group that put the details together,” Mall said. That included people involved in juvenile justice and child advocates.

A similar space is planned for the Avalon Center Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Program, paid for through another Rotary Club grant.

The Trauma Informed Community Alliance is working on other projects to help combat adverse childhood experiences. Called ACES, an increased number of adverse childhood experiences can put children at risk for future substance abuse, mental health disorders, chronic health conditions and even early death.

In Tennessee about 17% of adults had experienced four or more ACES with an estimated \$5.2 billion in direct medical lost productivity.

ACES can include natural traumas, like natural disasters or pandemics, and created trauma, like abuse, neglect, or growing up in poverty or in a household with substance abuse.

Donna King, a retired educator, said in April 2021 that when she first learned about ACES and how to better respond to trauma, “it was like a lightbulb went off in my head. This is the missing piece o the puzzle ... This is what is going to help us do better in our jobs, how we deal with children, how we deal with families.”

The alliance is looking at ways the overall community can implement trauma-informed concepts, from schools to healthcare to workplaces and the justice system.

In addition to the Comfort Corner trauma-sensitive rooms, the alliance also hopes to launch a directory of community resources by the end of the year.

Mall said the alliance is working with Empower Upper Cumberland, a program of the Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency, which received a grant to help combat poverty in the region.

The online resource can help families identify agencies and organizations that can assist with specific needs, such as food assistance, alcohol and drug rehabilitation programs, and shelter.

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