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The Family Justice Center:

Restoring Hope with Care for Survivors, and Support for Caregivers

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The NCACC first reported on the Guilford County Family Justice Center (FJC) shortly after it opened its Greensboro location June 2015. The FJC's opening was a long time coming for Guilford County Commissioner Kay Cashion as she reflected on the many years it took to research the concept and get all the pieces in place to finally open the doors, "What we ended up with is much better than if we had been in a position to move forward in 2010 when we had the first report," Cashion said, "Being able to evaluate what others had done and seeing what is possible has been tremendous. We have a center here that is almost totally encompassing."

As a community collaborative, the FJC brings together about 100 professionals

from 18 different disciplines to provide coordinated safety, legal, social and health services for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse and elder abuse. The FJC serves residents county-wide through two locations including Greensboro, and a more recent addition which opened in High Point in October 2018, to ensure services were accessible county-wide. Both facilities' renovations were made possible through the support of the City of Greensboro and City of High Point, which provided funding for their respective locations.

In 2013-2014, Guilford County led the state in the number of domestic violence-related homicides. FJC Director Catherine Johnson has served as the head of the Center since its opening, "Today,



we have had no homicides associated with anyone seeking help from either [FJC] location. What's amazing about it is what can be accomplished when a lot of different disciplines are coordinated well and partner well together. It's not a big secret or anything magical that happens at the FJC but when you have law enforcement, prosecutors and attorneys, social services, victim advocates and mental health professionals all in the same space who are encouraged to partner and work together and that collaboration is facilitated, really wonderful things can happen, versus working in isolation."

Coordination and collaboration is really where the magic comes in with the FJC concept. The mission is carried

out through the work of 10 extremely dedicated FJC staff members, community volunteers and various county and municipal departments and partners including Guilford County Department of Health and Human Services, Guilford County Social Services, Guilford County Sheriff's Office, Guilford County Court Services, Greensboro Police Department, High Point Police Department, District Attorney's Office, Legal Aid of Greensboro, Family Service of the Piedmont, Elon University School of Law, Children's Law Center of Central North Carolina, and the list goes on.

The work environment is intense, and Johnson recognizes that it's easy for people doing this important and challenging work to reach a saturation





Guilford County Family Justice Center focuses on creating a warm and inviting environment for its clients, and relies on talented staff, volunteers and partners to carry out its important mission.



point when the Center may see 50 walk-in clients in a single day, “We have to help the helper. We have to infuse energy and hope in the helper if we want the helper to make a difference.” Johnson is focused on internally supporting FJC employees, volunteers and partners and has recently started a program to bring therapy dogs into the office to bolster spirits, “To have a really awesome dog who’s a labradoodle named Kona or Willie the beagle come plop in your office and let him rub his belly, it’s amazing to see the response. If all it takes is a furry friend, I can handle that. We have to care for one another so we can continue to care for others. Let’s appreciate the people who do this hard work.”



When clients enter an FJC facility, they’re greeted by an administrative assistant who shows them to an inviting waiting room that has been carefully appointed with furnishings and amenities that help clients feel comfortable. Johnson recalls what she heard from victims when they considered how to design the facilities, “We did listening sessions with survivors before opening both centers and every time someone said, ‘I don’t know why it is that I’ve been the victim of crime and I feel like I did it, it’s my fault. I’m constantly having to explain myself and sitting in waiting rooms where the furniture is dirty and it’s smelly.’” Johnson took what she heard to heart and pays close attention to all the details that create an environment conducive to the FJC’s mission, “For my department, hospitality is a top priority. We do a lot of training in customer service and really being that warm, welcoming and professional space. My version of trauma care is it needs to look good, feel good and smell good.”



Guilford County identified existing county facilities located closely to the court house and other important partners for the two FJC locations, and outfitted them with appropriate security measures. All FJC professionals are trained to spot situations in which the client is at high-risk for the domestic violence leading to homicide, and apply related protocols. Special care is

Guilford County Family Justice Center's Elder Justice Committee addresses issues related to elder abuse, neglect and exploitation. Their "Friends Against Fraud" group gathered spring 2019 to pose for this photo.



taken to track those cases and oftentimes those offenders may get higher bond rates or may go to jail longer before first appearances.

The FJC infrastructure comes at a price but it's a far cry from the expense the county would incur if the departments worked in isolation, and the outcome for the individuals affected and the community is superior. "One domestic violence homicide and you incarcerate someone until time of trial is \$2.1 million. That's the national estimate," said Johnson. "You think about the resources counties put into investigation and putting someone in jail, DSS and all those other resources that get engaged when there's a homicide or serious crime. If we can prevent some of these things from happening, we can save the county tons of money."

Johnson spoke about the employee time that is saved as well, "Another huge benefit we've seen for the county is by being in one location and collaborating well, not only do we save people in crisis a lot of time but we also save professionals a lot of time. So their capacity to help people increases. Those resources are consolidated which is easier on the client and professional."

Before the FJC opened, Guilford County analyzed domestic violence victims' experience after seeking help from law enforcement and found that in the first 72 hours of a police response, the victim would need to fill out 72 sheets of

paperwork and get 27 phone calls. Now, law enforcement have one number to refer the person to – the FJC main line – and the coordinated services come into play from there.

When someone enters the FJC, there's the potential for interaction with many agencies. Johnson described a typical example, "A woman enters the FJC and tells us her husband assaulted her last night and their two-year-old was in the home. The husband is in jail waiting first appearances. Just in that 10 second account, we know they could interact with social services, law enforcement, pre-trial services, judge, clerk, advocate, sheriff, Greensboro police officer if in city limits, attorney with Legal Aid and a mental health professional. That's 10 people." The FJC has found that by engaging the client in identifying options and selecting a path forward, the client is more likely to feel they have a voice and follow through on next steps. Johnson points out that, "It's never been an issue with quality of service providers that are helping, it's been the coordination of those services. It's a common-sense blend that has resulted in a big shift."

While FJC's core mission is preventing domestic violence-related homicides and reducing violence, overall, the Center is always looking for solutions to bridge gaps. Two initiatives the FJC has undertaken in recent years are Elder Justice and Camp HOPE, programs focused on helping

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the elder and children, respectively. The Center looked at challenges impacting seniors and found that financial fraud and exploitation was a top concern, so began training county-wide to equip the elderly with information they need to mitigate abuse and prevent calls to Adult Protective Services. The training has been well-received with several thousand seniors attending to-date.

Tragically, domestic violence is often transmitted across generations and it can be very difficult to break a cycle that has perpetuated for so long. Camp HOPE was developed to provide a refuge for children ages 7-12 who have lived in homes with domestic violence to gain a better understanding of how they can chart a productive life path for themselves. The program has tripled in size since it began and Johnson sees how it will have long-term positive benefits, “We can lock someone up at 17 and say we’re tough on crime. Or we can show them a different pathway at 7, 8 and 9 and really change our community.”

The Guilford County Family Justice Center recently celebrated its fourth anniversary in June and Johnson has big plans for the future, “We’re just getting started. I think we do crisis response really well. Ten years from now when people say, ‘Where do you find hope?’ I want people to say the FJC. I want it to be a place of healing and restoration, not just a place of crisis response.”

Leadership from the Guilford County Board of Commissioners is a critical part of the FJC’s success. “County commissioners are wonderful

champions for collaboration like this as our collective impact is broad. Our Board established a sub-committee, chaired by Commissioner Kay Cashion, to support the development and launch of both FJCs,” said Johnson, “Their leadership, coupled with the unanimous support of the full Board, pushed this community concept over the finish line and made this dream a reality.” FJC professionals and commissioners continue to connect to celebrate milestones and reflect on accomplishments.

The FJC model was developed by the Alliance for HOPE International (AHI), which serves as a resource to communities considering starting a FJC. Alamance, Buncombe and Guilford counties have all undertaken the training needed to achieve the “Family Justice Center” designation afforded by AHI. Many more counties across the state are in the planning phase for a FJC, and Johnson facilitates the process by hosting a monthly conference call for FJC directors and those considering developing a FJC in their county.

For more information on how to begin a FJC, go to www.allianceforhope.com. Attendees of the NCACC’s 112th Annual Conference can learn more at a session entitled, “Family Justice Center Succeeding in Saving Lives, Restoring Hope,” to be held Saturday, August 24th 10:30-11:45 a.m. ■



Guilford County Family Justice Center launched Camp HOPE in 2017. The program provides children ages 7-12 who have lived in homes with domestic violence a camping and mentoring experience that includes team building and high adventure activities.