



Good afternoon chair and the committee. My name is Courtney Sutton and I'm the public policy director for the Colorado Organization for Victim Assistance (COVA). Our mission is to provide training, resources, and support to all crime victims and the professionals that serve them. We support HB26-1142 and the new statutory definition offered for Child Advocacy Centers.

Child advocacy centers are dedicated to providing a safe, child focused center for forensic interviews and collaborating in a multidisciplinary response to child abuse. CACs across Colorado provide comprehensive, supportive responses in child abuse cases to both the child and the family. The multidisciplinary team by definition would include representation from law enforcement agency, district attorney office, child protective services, a mental health provider, a health care provider, victim advocate, and CAC staff at minimum. This wraparound model of CACs are incredibly valuable for children and families throughout the stages of the criminal justice and child welfare process while also assisting in healing. CACs can provide critical education and prevention work in addition to the key work of forensic interviewing, counseling services, and support. Forensic interviews provide children the opportunity to speak in their own time and with their own voice. The MDT works together to ensure the best interests of the child are at the forefront throughout the process with streamlined investigations and enhanced coordination and communication between agencies and a victim and family.

We have a pervasive problem of child sexual abuse with 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 13 boys experiencing sexual abuse during their childhood per CDC. The trauma of child abuse can cause children to lose their sense of safety and trust. This trauma without support or treatment can lead to mental health diagnoses like depression, anxiety, and PTSD, behavioral reactions like substance abuse, engaging in risky sexual actions, and long-term physical health problems. However, when children receive the care and support needed, they can thrive. The evidence-based therapies provided by CACs along with support and services for parents or family help in healing the child. Therapy can reduce trauma symptoms and alleviate PTSD. Without a CAC kids and families must find mental health, medical, and support services on their own. With a CAC the services are within one agency!

This updated definition will ensure consistency statewide across CAC programs and better protect children through coordinated, trauma informed support and response to child abuse. It will also ensure multidisciplinary collaboration and in turn increase accountability for those that abuse children.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Please support HB26-1142.