

# MHRB conference highlights teamwork as a way to deal with child abuse

By Kristi Schweitzer T-G Staff Writer Published: March 7, 2016 4:00 AM



- Times-Gazette photo/Joe Pelletier Kayla, a therapy dog with University Hospitals, lays down during a panel discussion Wednesday at Ashland University's John C. Myers Convocation Center. Kayla's owner, Nancy Lynch, spoke after the panel about the 6-year-old golden retriever's role in assisting with child therapy and care.

Ashland County counselors and social workers and ministers were challenged to work together and make a difference in child abuse during a Mental Health and Recovery Board conference.

The two-day event was titled When Faith Hurts: Understanding, Recognizing and Responding to the Physical, Emotional and Spiritual Impact of Child Maltreatment.

Centered around child sexual abuse, session topics included adverse childhood experiences and trauma-informed care; use and misuse of Scripture in counseling maltreated children; when child abuse hits home; corporal punishment, the law and the faith community; and implementing personal safety training in faith-based institutions.

The conference concluded with a panel of Ashland Police Division detective Kim Mager, Pastor Mike Parker of First Presbyterian Church in Ashland, Ashland County Prosecutor Chris Tunnell and Children's Services supervisor Traci Foley.

Facilitated by keynote speaker Victor Vieth, founder and senior director of Gunderson National Child Protection Training Center, the panel examined two case studies and answered questions from the audience.

The first case study was of a single, pregnant 22-year-old woman who grew up in an abusive home in which her mother physically and mentally abused her and allowed her many boyfriends to sexually abuse her. In the scenario, she is seeking help from a counselor but doesn't want to be preached at.

From a legal standpoint, Tunnell said any abuse from her mother's boyfriends is "well within the statute of limitations" and needs to be reported. "Generally speaking, it's 20 years from the time they turn 18, with some exceptions," Tunnell said.

Mager said an important question she would ask is if there are other children the mother is in charge of whom also could be at risk.

Foley said due to the woman's age, her agency wouldn't get directly involved but she would redirect her to others to get help. She said after the woman's child is born, she could help in that way.

Parker said he and those in the audience represent God when handling issues like this and need to be reminded of that. "I think if we can keep that on the forefront of our mind, it helps us to want to come to her in a place of empathy," Parker said.

The second case study was of a 40-year-old man who has been divorced twice and suffers from depression from being sexually abused by his father from the time he was a young child until he left for college.

In this scenario, he comes to a counselor resenting a comment a religious friend made to him about God allowing pain and suffering yet still watching over him, and asks if God enjoyed watching him being abused.

Mager responded by saying she doesn't think any good comes from sexual abuse. However, she has seen people come out of such abuse stronger and better equipped than others to help other people. She added that every department that deals with issues like this, including the police department, has to be careful what they say to victims because "what you say can impact someone."

Tunnell mentioned abuse up until college is unusual, and said there should be an investigation to see if any other children are being affected.

Parker said, in this situation, he would try to establish a relationship and tell the man his friend's comments were not fair, and would "try to debunk any lies that he's come to believe."

The audience asked questions, including how long investigations take, can a child get help while the case is ongoing and are counselors obligated to report if past abuse is brought up.

Tunnell and Mager agreed the length of an investigation varies case by case. Mager added, in child abuse cases, the investigation has to be timely to get the most accurate details from the child right away.

Addressing whether or not to report past abuse if brought up in a counseling session, Vieth said it depends on the delicacy of the situation and if it won't cause great emotional trauma if reported.

Mager said communication is key among all entities.

"I'm going to use you as a resource. You use me as well," Mager said.

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