

With budget cuts in Vancouver, the Children's Justice Center could lose advocates for child abuse victims

\$283,000 from Vancouver is 'not recommended' as city's \$43 million deficit looms

By [Alexis Weisend](#), Columbian staff reporter

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Victim advocate Ashlie Clark gives a tour of the Children's Justice Center in downtown Vancouver. Clark's position, which was created with funding from the pandemic-era American Rescue Plan Act, is on the chopping block alongside a forensic investigator's. (Amanda Cowan/The Columbian) **Photo Gallery**

Referrals to Children's Justice Center

	2022	2023	2024*
Vancouver Police Department	847	781	727
Clark County Sheriff's Office	429	530	538
Battle Ground Police Department	62	61	38
Camas Police Department	24	22	6
Ridgefield Police Department	25	27	4
Washougal Police Department	26	24	24

*2024 includes January through August

SOURCE: Children's Justice Center

A 13-year-old human trafficking victim came to the [Children's Justice Center](#) nine times but refused to testify against those who were exploiting her. Tracking her down after she fled was difficult, said Amy Russell, executive director of the social service agency that helps children and families through child abuse cases.

So when a victim advocate and prosecutor found out the young girl had entered a treatment center in another state, they traveled to talk with her. The day before the trafficker's trial, she agreed to testify.

She plans to testify in three more cases against human traffickers, Russell said.

Outcomes like this won't be as likely if the city of Vancouver goes forward with its recommended budget, which does not include the funding necessary to hire an additional advocate or keep two positions — a victim advocate and forensic investigator — on staff, Russell said.

"She probably wouldn't have testified, which means we wouldn't have got a conviction. So that individual would have been free to continue to abuse other youth," Russell said.

Russell said city staff previously agreed to match the county's contribution to pay for the two positions after COVID-era funding runs out at the end of the year. In the city manager's recommended budget, however, the city's \$283,000 is listed as "not recommended" in an effort to balance a projected \$43 million budget shortfall for 2025-26.

The city and Clark County share responsibility for funding the Children's Justice Center, Russell said. Vancouver pays a little more than half of the center's budget. The city contributed \$890,000 in 2023-24. The city also committed \$2.9 million over that period to four Vancouver Police Department positions that support the work of the Children's Justice Center, according to city spokesperson Tim Becker.

Still, Children's Justice Center employees are struggling with overwhelming caseloads, Russell said. If the Children's Justice Center loses more staff, victim advocates will have even less time for the victims they help, Russell said.

"If we don't have victim advocates who are able to maintain that connection with the children and families, then what that often sounds like to children and families is you don't care," Russell said.

Russell worries that a loss in funding will cause a loss of trust, participation and convictions.

"I think the long-term consequence is that we are not holding offenders accountable, so our community is not as safe as we want it to be," Russell said.

'Look for money'

Russell walked down the colorful halls of the Children's Justice Center with Gandalf, the center's gentle therapy dog.

She opened the door to the room where forensic investigators interview children about their abuse. Detectives can watch through cameras or a false window. The seat for the child is big enough so Gandalf, a greyhound, can rest his long snout comfortably on the victim.

Russell closed the door and stood quietly in front of a tree cutout on the wall. Woodland creatures adorn the tree. Each victim entering the center can decorate one.

"It's so they know they're not alone," Russell said.

Most of the children served by the center experience sexual abuse. Others experience physical abuse, neglect, trafficking, violence or drug exposure. The tree often becomes so crowded with cutouts, staff have to file some away to make room for more, Russell said.

So far this year, the Children's Justice Center has grappled with an average of almost 700 cases a month. With only three victim advocates, that's around 230 cases per person. The industry standard is 20 to 50, according to Russell.

Victim advocate Ashlie Clark admits the caseload can be stressful, but she loves her job. She walks families through every step of the court process, explaining next steps, making referrals to therapy and other resources, and sitting with victims in court.

Her youngest victim is just 3 years old.

Victim advocates keep victims' families updated on criminal cases after investigations close. That's when law enforcement stops talking with the family.

"So if we don't have time to talk to with them, then nobody's talking with them," Clark said.

Clark's position, which was created with funding from the American Rescue Plan Act to address cases pushed back during the pandemic, is on the chopping block alongside a forensic investigator's.

Vancouver officials, Russell said, previously agreed to continue funding the positions along with the county once the federal funding expired. But no contract was signed.

At a Vancouver City Council workshop on Monday, Natasha Ramras, the city's chief financial officer, said the funding was not recommended for the Children's Justice Center positions because maintaining police officers and firefighters took priority.

"Look for money," Councilor Ty Stober said.

The last workshop for the recommended budget is Oct. 28. The final budget will be adopted Nov. 18 after a public hearing.



Alexis Weisend

Columbian staff reporter

 @weisend_alexis

 (360) 735-4536

 alexis.weisend@columbian.com