May 7, 2014 Bel Air, MD — The Harford County Child Advocacy Center (CAC) recently celebrated its 20th Anniversary with an open house and ceremony. Held on April 24th at the Armory in downtown Bel Air, over 100 guests attended the event and later toured the Family Justice Center. Speakers included: State’s Attorney for Harford County, Joseph I. Cassilly; Harford County Sheriff, L. Jesse Bane; Director of the Harford County Department of Social Services, Jerome M. Reyerson; and CAC Program Director, Lieutenant Veto A. Mentzell of the Harford County Sheriff’s Office. Local physician, Dr. Paul Lomonico, was also recognized for his longtime service to the community as the CAC’s forensic pediatrician.

The history of the center was detailed in the event program. “The CAC opened its doors on October 8th, 1993 and in the years since has helped countless children and their families deal with allegations of child abuse and exploitation. The structure of the CAC remains based on the multi-disciplinary model established by the National Children’s Alliance (NCA). This includes investigations and therapeutic interventions in child maltreatment cases, which are handled by standing teams of social workers, detectives, prosecutors, medical and mental health practitioners, as well as victim advocates. The original Inter-Agency Agreement to create the CAC was signed by the Harford County State’s Attorney’s Office, the Harford County Department of Social Services, the Harford County Sheriff’s Office, the Maryland State Police and the three municipal police agencies –Aberdeen, Bel Air and Havre de Grace Police Departments. The CAC was originally accredited by the NCA in 1998 and is one of only ten accredited centers in Maryland.”

In his comments to the audience, Lieutenant Mentzell noted that the CAC’s mission to protect the community’s children is always ongoing. Through every challenge whether it’s staffing, budget cuts, personal hardship and loss, severe weather, or workplace challenges, he said, “The work never stops”.

“These referrals come into our office every day and the victims deserve our undivided attention. That is why the CAC was created in the first place. These cases are sensitive in nature and are different from most any other investigation our respective agencies...
handle. We have a talented multi-disciplinary team who provide focused, full-service and specialized investigative attention to children and families in need”, Mentzell said. “It is a difficult job but our staff is committed to stopping the abuse first, providing the necessary resources to the child and their family, and then prosecuting the offender. I am proud to be associated with such a dedicated group of individuals”, he concluded.

State’s Attorney Cassilly complimented the CAC for always being on the leading edge of new developments in their field saying, “[A colleague] was just telling me we should try to develop a therapy animal program, but as you can see today we are already working on one.” Cassilly was referring to handler, Detective Carey Gerres, and her canine companion, Kilo, a 5-year-old yellow Labrador Retriever. Gerres and Kilo are part of a pilot program in partnership with PAWS for People (Pet-Assisted Visitation Volunteer Services, Inc.) to bring animal assisted therapeutic visits to the CAC.

Harford County Sheriff, L. Jesse Bane, remarked about the growth of the CAC and how the development of the CAC completely changed the path a child victim and their family walks when moving through the criminal justice system. “Twenty years ago, a child victim of abuse was handled like any other major crime, which didn’t work. It left families frustrated at the process of working with so many different systems and it left detectives frustrated at the lack of good communication between agencies. The idea to bring all services together under one roof, put those challenges in the past and opened the door to victim centered investigations.”

Director Reyerson was one of the original architects of the CAC, calling the center a “pocket of excellence” and praising them for how far they’ve come in these 20 years. “I believe that in life there are but 6 or 7 experiences, decisions we make, that forever change the course of our lives. The same can be said of organizations and the services they provide. The creation of our Child Advocacy Center is an example one of those decisions,” Reyerson said. “Safety, permanence and well-being, these are the pillars of our public welfare practice. Clearly the Child Advocacy Center is a superior entity representing these principles,” he continued. Citing HCDSS statistics, Reyerson noted that since the creation of the CAC in 1998 only about an average of 5 children per year have been placed into foster care as a result of sexual abuse. “Why?” he said, “Because we now remove the offender, not the child – we don’t re-victimize the victim.” Reyerson ended with a quote from Frederick Douglass, “It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.”

In addition to the celebratory presentations, letters of congratulations and proclamations were offered by State, County and local officials.

For more information contact the CAC at 410-638-3294 or visit us on the web at www.harfordcac.org.