



[00:00:00] **DiDi Ellis:** One day we will not be here and we need to make sure that we can grow some people that are just as passionate about this work as those of us that sit in these seats right now.

[00:00:11] **Christina Rouse:** Welcome to the SRCAC Exchange, a podcast series for child abuse professionals who are looking to exchange innovative ideas and gain inspiration within the CAC movement.

[00:00:23] **Christina Rouse:** I'm your host, Christina Rouse. Program Manager for CAC Development with SRCAC. This season we'll be focusing on the invisible threads that sustain the dedicated professionals in Children's Advocacy Centers. Our guests will partake in dynamic discussions around supportive workplace cultures, the importance of MDT relationships, and more.

[00:00:45] **Christina Rouse:** What we are telling ourselves about our work and so many other topics that will ignite passion. So whether you are a seasoned CAC professional or just starting out in your career, join us as we delve into this critical topic. [00:01:00] How can CACs and chapters engage in fostering the next generation of talent within the field?

[00:01:07] **Christina Rouse:** Is success determined by where they start or is it the experiences along the way that matters most? The state of Mississippi is pioneering change with a comprehensive statewide approach that's unlocking new potential. Join us as we dive into this transformative initiative and discover how it's preparing the future workforce.

[00:01:27] **Christina Rouse:** Joining me today are Karla Steckler Tye, the CEO of Children's Advocacy Centers of Mississippi, and DiDi Ellis, the CEO and founder of Kids Hub Child Advocacy Center. With over 25 years of combined experience, Karla and DiDi have shaped the landscape of child advocacy at both the chapter and local levels in Mississippi through their leadership and innovative programming.

[00:01:49] **Christina Rouse:** Let's hear how they are developing future professionals in their state.

[00:01:56] **Christina Rouse:** One frequent topic of conversation in [00:02:00] the CAC field currently is turnover. In the National Children's Alliance 2021 Staffing and Salary Survey, the data showed that the average CAC can expect one or two staff persons to become vacant each year. With an average national turnover of about 19 percent Karla, as the chapter level, how have you seen that turnover impact our field?

[00:02:31] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** A number of years ago, we partnered with the Attorney General's office and the Department of Child Protective Services to really look at. The root cause for the existence of gaps in children needing services, and that high turnover rate just really rose to the top. And that was the entire continuum from law enforcement, social workers, child advocacy center, staff, prosecutors, medical professionals, the whole gamut.

[00:02:57] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** And so you can imagine this [00:03:00] is really tough work, and we knew that the gravity of the work.

[00:03:08] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** And so our respective agencies were spending a lot of money and time, resources on retraining professionals. So it just felt like, as you're talking about, we're having professionals leave and another professional come in. And there was just this continuous cycle of training professionals that were leaving the field within two years of coming in the door of the agency.

[00:03:33] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** That has a direct impact on children and the operations of the CAC, and it led to this gap in services where all of a sudden you have someone leave and suddenly you don't have a therapist there anymore, or you don't have a forensic interview, or you don't have a detective. And I think this is really heightened in a state like Mississippi that's rural, and that you may only have 1 detective in that community, or you may have a social worker that's covering multiple counties.[00:04:00]

[00:04:00] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** So when suddenly there's an abrupt. Departure of an employee, it absolutely impacts that child's case, and you may have a rural CAC that suddenly doesn't have a forensic interviewer or doesn't have a therapist, and now there's going to be some long wait times for that child.

[00:04:18] **Christina Rouse:** Didi, at the local level, as a CAC director, how have you seen turnover impact the services?

[00:04:26] **DiDi Ellis:** It's exactly what Karla said. I think that we recently have had a shortage of forensic interviewers in our own facility. Very specifically, we were seeing children have to wait up to three weeks to receive a forensic interview. We had an interviewer, but we have quite a high volume of kids that walk through our doors.

[00:04:45] **DiDi Ellis:** And so we were Trapped. We were unable to see these kids as quickly as possible. So what was really happening is Children were waiting to get forensic interviews, but they can't be forced to wait to get medicals. So they were getting their medicals [00:05:00] ahead of time. Our medical providers that we partner with had no Knowledge about the child's disclosures or what they would be saying at the in depth level that they would if they had come for the forensic interview first.

[00:05:10] **DiDi Ellis:** So they were having to ask a lot more questions from the child during that medical exam. Kids were needing some intentional therapy services, but again, they didn't need to wait three and four weeks to be accessing those. So they were doing initial intakes with therapists before coming for a forensic interview.

[00:05:27] **DiDi Ellis:** And then by the time they get to the forensic interview, they're like, how many more people do I have to tell my story to? And what we were seeing is the old way of doing things. So we've got a great child advocacy center. We have all the people in place to do the work, but yet we're really traumatizing the children more by the nature of the system because we don't have the staff to manage that just due to turnover.

[00:05:49] **Christina Rouse:** Yeah, I think turnover, as you all mentioned, can be problematic and is problematic for the services that are offered to

our clients. So, we want to answer that question. What is [00:06:00] going to eliminate turnover in our field? And ideally, we kind of want to know in the inset when that person's hired, are you going to stay?

[00:06:08] **Christina Rouse:** Are you going to be here for a long period of time? And there's so many variables that go into play, which makes that really tricky. So, how do you know what qualities you're looking for or even what skills make a CAC hire someone that might be there for the long haul?

[00:06:27] **DiDi Ellis:** I think you can Look at resumes, right?

[00:06:29] **DiDi Ellis:** And you see that you've got someone who has been formerly employed with Child Protection Services. They've been a law enforcement investigator. So they've worked within the multidisciplinary team model. They're familiar with the work of the Child Advocacy Center and being a partner with us in the past.

[00:06:44] **DiDi Ellis:** And you might want to jump to the initial conclusion that, oh, this could be a great fit because they already have so much working knowledge. But it's also a challenge. And so what we've seen is, for me, it's assessing, so how come you're making this transition from one of our partner [00:07:00] agencies to the CAC?

[00:07:02] **DiDi Ellis:** Because sometimes it's organizational issue, right? They have problems within, they're tired of that role, they have problems within that organization, and we happen to have an opening, and so they would be qualified for that opening. But reality is, Karla mentioned this, work is hard work. And so it's not any easier here at the Child Advocacy Center than it is.

[00:07:22] **DiDi Ellis:** At the sheriff's office or the police department or with child protection services. And so, for me, I look at that, it actually throws up a red flag. More than it does something that I'm like, ooh, experience. Let me jump on that particular candidate. Now, with that being said, there's a lot of value in that experience.

[00:07:42] **DiDi Ellis:** You don't necessarily have to spend as much time training that individual on, The whole model, you just have to spend more time doing the day to day practice that in the Child Advocacy Center and what it looks like here. But personally, I really love green folks. I really love the fresh new [00:08:00] faces because I think we can, as professionals, if we're not careful, we can get jaded in our normal way of doing things.

[00:08:06] **DiDi Ellis:** And so I love what new emerging professionals bring to the table when it comes to new ideas, a new excitement for this work. I think it can kind of help some of us that have been doing it for a long time kind of embrace that excitement. We remember ourselves in those days, right? We remember when we felt like we could actually jump in and Change the world one kid at a time and we can, but sometimes we get bogged down in the day to day.

[00:08:32] **DiDi Ellis:** And so I love what emerging new professionals can bring to the field. Now it's taxing because they cost me a little bit more when it comes to training and time and that sort of thing, but I've often found that it's really worth it to balance the two, right? There's a lot to be learned from those wise guys and there's a lot to be learned from those overzealous newbies.

[00:08:53] **Christina Rouse:** Karla, you've been in Mississippi for a long period of time. I'm sure you can think of one or two [00:09:00] professionals inside your state that have been there for longevity, right? Yourself included. What qualities do you find in those people that have stayed for a long time?

[00:09:10] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** Obviously, you start with passion.

[00:09:12] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** They really are dedicated to the work that they've done, but have also overcome those hurdles. There's so many challenges and you can easily become jaded, but there are those that seem to have the skills to be able to solution based and really try and move forward with the team as a whole. I think that itself is a huge win, is when someone doesn't try and carry the burden alone in these cases, that they say they really understand the value of collaboration and obviously with the Child Advocacy Center movement.

[00:09:46] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** That's our language when we start talking about teamwork. And so it's not feeling like I'm the person that has to do it all, that you share that responsibility in making sure that a case is, And a child gets all the services they need [00:10:00] because obviously no one person can investigate the case and provide the treatment and prosecute the case.

[00:10:06] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** And so that's the world that we work in every day. But I think that the passion, the collaboration, and then really thinking through problem solving, critical thinking skills.

[00:10:17] **Christina Rouse:** Yeah, all those qualities are really important to think about when we're looking for our new hires at CACs. And so with sustainability and retention of staff at the forefront of a lot of folks mind, not just CAC directors, but also chapter leaders.

[00:10:34] **Christina Rouse:** Why is it important that we carve out time to have conversations or even strategic plans thinking about the pathway for these future professionals that we want to hire? Why is that important?

[00:10:48] **DiDi Ellis:** At the local level, I think it's important because it costs us money. Every time we lose an employee, it costs us money.

[00:10:55] **DiDi Ellis:** Every time we have to rehire, it costs us money. But even more than that, it [00:11:00] costs kids and families things. And so It's important that we can come up with a sustainability plan to manage the retention of these employees to care for them because caring for them means that we can care for the kids and families better.

[00:11:15] **DiDi Ellis:** And so, again, the cost is there, but it's not just a financial cost. Just like we talk about with multidisciplinary teams, every time a team member changes, there's a culture shift within that team. Same thing happens in CAC staff. Every time we have turnover, and this is not just CAC, right? This is business world in general, but every time there's a change in a staff person.

[00:11:37] **DiDi Ellis:** The whole staff has to completely reorient themselves to one another without that person there and then try to bring in someone

new into the fold. And you know, that brings so much, all the fun HR issues that come with that, just dealing with personnel. But all of that costs us when it comes to how our employees feel every day that they come to work and every day that they come to [00:12:00] work, they have to serve a family.

[00:12:01] **DiDi Ellis:** And so how has that turnover impacted them? You see the frustration in. The employees that are having to tote the load, so to speak, for the one that left and then having to train the new person that's come in, but it slows down their job. And so the impact is pretty great in a lot of different fronts.

[00:12:19] **DiDi Ellis:** And again, the impact to the families at the end of the day, that's what it's all about.

[00:12:24] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** And I would say children obviously deserve better, which is what Didi's getting at. But our students and our future workforce also deserve better. So we have been setting them up. For so long, because they get into this field because they're well meaning and they want to help kids, and yet we have not truly prepared them for the realities of what it's going to be when DD hires them at the Child Advocacy Center, or they get hired at Child Protective Services or law enforcement.

[00:12:53] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** For too long, we have just not properly trained our workforce. So, a teacher gets out of [00:13:00] school, and yet they don't know how to identify abuse, and then they don't know how to make a mandated report. They're just not comfortable with that. You have social workers coming out that are not prepared for what that is going to be like when they go and knock on a door for the 1st time and have to remove a child and bring them into custody, but it goes on and on and on in every field, whether you're going to go into becoming a prosecutor, a medical provider.

[00:13:25] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** When we started looking at this, and talked about looking at the gaps in children receiving services, we started talking to our colleagues, and I had one medical school professor say to me that there were two sentences in their medical textbook on interpersonal violence. So that's two sentences to cover domestic violence,

sexual assault, child abuse, and we were just not preparing our workforce for the realities that they're going to see.

[00:13:53] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** And we have to do better for them, but knowing that they're going out into these homes, I'm going to be working these cases. You may have [00:14:00] a child's life that is literally hanging in the balance. And yet we have not prepared our workforce for what that's going to look like. And then I would say, going even further 1 of our greatest challenges with.

[00:14:11] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** Being in the CC world is that we have to work together going back to this teamwork. You have to have collaboration between law enforcement and child protective services and all the other entities that get involved. But yet, on the college level, we. Work in silos, so you rarely have a social work department interacting with, say, the criminal justice department, or those that are going to be going into medical school or going into face studies.

[00:14:40] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** Every department tends to operate in a silo, so we are teaching our professionals to work in a silo. And then getting them out into the workforce and having to break down that. So we have to change that mindset after they get employed at the child advocacy center, or after they're getting hired at the child protective [00:15:00] services, we're having to completely change the mindset that they were being taught on the college level.

[00:15:05] **Christina Rouse:** Yeah. Thinking about these future professionals, you hit the nail on the head, Karla, that. We've seen time and time again, people well intended to want to do the work without the skills to be able to really execute the day to day job in practice. So Karla, I know Mississippi took on this huge initiative.

[00:15:25] **Christina Rouse:** to implement CAST. So tell us about that endeavor and what CAST is.

[00:15:31] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** So our mission at the Children's Advocacy Center of Mississippi is to revolutionize the response to child abuse through leadership, innovation, and training. And I will say I cannot



think of a better example of that mission than the work that we're doing with CAST, which is Child Advocacy Studies, but we often call it CAST for short.

[00:15:50] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** And as I mentioned earlier, we have a strong partnership with the Attorney General's office and Child Protection Services. So we decided to work together to try and address these [00:16:00] challenges that we were seeing with the high turnover. And bottom line is that we had to move upstream. If we were going to have true systemic change, we had to do something different, which then is going to address those gaps and children receiving services.

[00:16:15] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** So, our 3 agencies have this unified vision that if we implemented CAST, and. Then at that point, we can make a major change in our state with preparing our workforce for the realities of this work. And I do feel like we have the right agencies to drive that vision forward. So, we all reached out to our state's institutions of higher learning.

[00:16:39] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** We have about 40 in Mississippi, and we asked for them to come on board with us to create a better prepared workforce. So, meaning that students would have training on the practical knowledge. Of the dynamics of abuse, they would know how to respond to a case before they were ever exiting school. And the key to [00:17:00] the entire vision was that they had to be interdisciplinary.

[00:17:04] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** The course had to be interdisciplinary, meaning that they were going to be learning the art of collaboration as well as implementation. So, we've now you're going to have social work students taking courses with criminal justice majors taking courses with. Pre law pre med with face studies, nursing students that they were all going to be in these courses together and that they would be interdisciplinary, but they're also going to have experiential learning as a part of that.

[00:17:32] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** So that they actually get to not just learn about the theory, but actually put that theory into practice. And I will say the response was incredible. We were just overwhelmed by the number of

colleges and universities that said, this is the right time. And we should have been doing this all along. And they absolutely came on board with us.

[00:17:53] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** This is not unique to Mississippi. CAS had already been implemented in a number of states across the country.

[00:18:00] But when we got on board with this, we immediately doubled the national footprint. Because what we did differently than in other states is we said, if we're going to make a true systemic change, we've got to get all of our schools on board.

[00:18:13] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** And it can't just be one school in say, North Mississippi, have a few graduates come out and change the system. It's got to be the entire state and we have to really make a culture shift in how we're preparing our workforce. So we now have 21 colleges and universities, community colleges, law schools, medical schools that are trained and offering child advocacy studies.

[00:18:34] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** courses. The classes are interdisciplinary and they have curriculum on how to effectively address child abuse and neglect in that real world application using the multidisciplinary team response, which is near and dear to our hearts at the Child Advocacy Centers. And so they're really learning from the onset how to work collaboratively for the best interest of Children.

[00:18:59] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** The CAST [00:19:00] courses offer experiential and trauma informed learning. The learning objectives are centered around the application of theories and methods. They look at the legal framework. They're looking at ethical considerations and cases. They're understanding all of the different agencies that have to spring into action when there's a case of abuse.

[00:19:21] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** And then they're looking at the development of skills necessary to provide that full provision of services in child maltreatment. And at this point, we have now had over 1,600 students take one or more CAST courses. And we have been doing this not quite a decade, but we are getting close to it. And we knew that from the onset that this was not going to be an overnight change.

[00:19:44] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** You're talking about changing the entire workforce, you're talking about changing a culture. With something that we had to be comfortable looking years and years in advance to say that we're not going to see a change right away, but this is kind of the long game. [00:20:00] I will also say that the experiential learning is absolutely the cornerstone of the CAF courses because we want students to apply what they're learning in problem based simulations.

[00:20:12] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** So be able to make mistakes in a controlled environment. So we want students to feel comfortable going in. And knowing what it's going to be like to knock on a door, talk to a parent, to do an investigation, to provide a medical exam, and have mistakes made in a controlled environment where they can then get feedback from their peers and from the faculty, so that when they go out and interact in a real case, they have that confidence to be able to do that.

[00:20:41] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** And then. As a part of that, we ended up creating the Mississippi's first simulation center designed for the response to child abuse. And that was at the request of our colleges and universities. And so we now have a simulation center that's got a mock courtroom and a medical [00:21:00] clinic and residences, teachers, classroom, essentially students and frontline professionals can come through from.

[00:21:09] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** I'm seeing to trial and have that experience in a real world setting.

[00:21:14] **Christina Rouse:** Yeah, we had an opportunity to talk with Addison, a cast graduate. And in our conversation, she named the power of those simulated experiences. And so let's hear a little bit about what she had to say.

[00:21:33] **Addison Alexander:** It is a training center for professionals and students that sets up simulation rooms that you walk through and it uses a lot of different elements to make a very sensorial experience.

[00:21:46] **Addison Alexander:** Um, so this was the first time that almost any of us had been in an in person situation trying to put together what we've learned so far. Say we're in this room that's been set up to show signs

of [00:22:00] maltreatment happening somewhere and you're looking around and they have candles that are lit that smell like bad smells and you're doing everything that kind of a social worker does.

[00:22:11] **Addison Alexander:** for the first time in kind of a safe setting where you can make a face and then be like, Oh, I've got to fix that. I've got to be aware of that. And it's bringing you to this place of an awareness that you hadn't had before. It's putting what was on paper. Into real life.

[00:22:30] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** The Child Advocacy Training Institute, which is our simulation center, is just really powerful for individuals when they come through because they are getting the sights, the sounds, the smells, and interacting with.

[00:22:45] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** Actors that are really realistic. And so whether you're coming through as a social work student or criminal justice major, who's going to be our future law enforcement or a prosecutor, you're getting the realities of [00:23:00] what it's like to go into home and we can change these, we can change the setting for depending on what the case is, whatever kind of case we're wanting to simulate.

[00:23:09] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** But there's real power in that support that they have from going through. Experiencing it for the 1st time, and then getting feedback from a professor, because things come up when you have to implement that critical thinking skill in the moment. That you won't get when you're just sitting in a classroom reading a textbook.

[00:23:30] **Christina Rouse:** And to be clear, the CAST curriculum, like you mentioned, is interdisciplinary, so this is not a curriculum just for professionals wanting to go into the CAC field, per se.

[00:23:42] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** Absolutely not. The CAST course was designed for anybody that would be going out into a field where they may interact with children and need those skills to better prepare them for identifying abuse and then learning how to respond to it.

[00:23:59] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** And a great [00:24:00] example of this is that when We went around from school to school, which we also call the

roadship. So that's what I was mentioning before when we went from school to school to talk about the fact that we wanted them to come on board with us and help us implement cash. And we went to 1 college and the dean said to me.

[00:24:17] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** I absolutely believe in this. This is great. We should be doing this. And I want all of our culinary students to go through the course. And I was so surprised by the fact that he wanted his culinary students. It made sense with social workers and the nursing students and teachers, but culinary. And so when we asked him why he said, well, we have camps across our campus all summer long.

[00:24:41] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** We have football camps, cheerleading camps, you name it. We've got. young kids that are on our campus all summer long and our culinary students are the ones that are feeding them and They interact with all of those young children that come on the campus And so they would have a line of sight and would [00:25:00] maybe see something maybe hear something they developing a relationship with these students that are coming on the course and I thought that's ingenious and It was really kind of out of the box of thinking, but once you take these courses, then it makes you a better parent.

[00:25:14] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** It's going to make you a better juror. This really is valuable for any student that may be going through college. I mean, I would encourage anyone to take these courses.

[00:25:24] **Christina Rouse:** And we know that with the experiential part, of the curriculum in the courses. They also have a potential to become interns and have their placements, their internship placements in a field that they're learning about in the CAST program.

[00:25:39] **Christina Rouse:** So DiDi, I know you had a CAST intern at your CAC. What was that experience like for you? So, quite

[00:25:46] **DiDi Ellis:** frankly, the state chapter did a great job in identifying some federal money that could support the CAST program, but then it was also at a particular season of time for the Child Advocacy Centers where we had experienced a large cut in [00:26:00] funding from VOCA.

[00:26:01] **DiDi Ellis:** And so, we were struggling to fill vacant positions because we didn't have the money to do it. And they were innovative and said, how can we utilize some of these funds to support cast, but then also support the child advocacy centers. And so they had kind of earmarked some funds that could be utilized to have paid interns at the CAC.

[00:26:22] **DiDi Ellis:** And so being able to have a paid intern, anybody knows, not everybody loves to work for free. And so having that, you know, they get something for it in return more than just the experience. It does drum up a little bit more. emphasis on what it is that I'm here to do. And so we at Kids Hub in Hattiesburg have a really strong partnership with the University of Southern Miss, and specifically the Kappa Deltas sorority, because their national philanthropy is to prevent child abuse.

[00:26:52] **DiDi Ellis:** And we had had a student volunteering, a Kappa Delta student volunteering in our office, and we were sitting down just talking to her, and she was like, [00:27:00] I'm enrolled in CAST courses and I'm really interested in the work of the Child Advocacy Center. So we kind of started talking. I said, well, it's funny that you say that because I just so happen to actually have money for a paid internship for students that are enrolled in CAST courses.

[00:27:16] **DiDi Ellis:** And so we kind of fleshed out what that would look like for her. And she was working a part time gig in town, maybe at the tanning salon or something. And she was like, I would much rather get paid to learn how to do what it is I want to do for a living, than this other job that I have. And so we talked through all of that.

[00:27:35] **DiDi Ellis:** We ended up bringing her on as a paid intern. And what we found with her, with her being enrolled in CAST courses is she was just set apart. She was set apart from other interns. And we have great interns that come through the facility. Don't get me wrong. But she was set apart. She was here. She was eager.

[00:27:53] **DiDi Ellis:** She had identified that she was passionate about. Child advocacy studies that she was [00:28:00] passionate about working with children that experienced abuse. And for her, she really did think through if I'm here doing this job, I have so much potential to gain so much

more knowledge about this field and not just in the day to day job of a child advocacy center, but do I even actually like this work?

[00:28:23] **DiDi Ellis:** I think this is what I want to do. I think these are the kids and families that I want to work with. Do I even have what it takes to do that? Is that something that I would really like to do? And so we had her as an intern for close to 2 years. I want to say, and then we had the privilege of being able to.

[00:28:43] **DiDi Ellis:** Really assess whether or not she would be a good fit for our organization. And so you hire somebody brand new, you really don't know what you're getting. Everybody does their best in an interview, right? In a job interview, but we had an opportunity to interview her day after day, after day, [00:29:00] after day, when she came in as an intern to really decide if she was a good fit for our organization.

[00:29:07] **DiDi Ellis:** If she could collaborate with our multidisciplinary teams effectively, if she could work with the children and families that walked through our door. And so we did end up hiring her as a family advocate as soon as she graduated. So we had a great experience.

[00:29:21] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** I just wanted to add that I think one of the beauties of CAST is that you help students figure out if they're in the right field before they ever get out of school.

[00:29:31] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** And I think the internship is so valuable to that. Decision making, because we get so many students that come in that are well meaning and they say, I care about kids and I want to do something to help kids. And so they may get into social work and they don't really understand the complexities of the work until they get out and do it.

[00:29:53] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** And they understand they go through some task forces, but really, the internship is a [00:30:00] window into that. And what we're finding across the state that we're hearing is exactly what D. D. said is that these students are a little ahead of the others because they have this base foundation. But I think they're also learning on that front end.



[00:30:14] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** Wait a minute. This is for me, or it's not for me. When we start talking about, going back to your first question about two employees leaving every single year, and then what we were seeing with the turnover every two years with all of our disciplines, that we got to get folks in the right seat and in the right field.

[00:30:34] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** And it may be that someone comes in, and they think they're gonna be a social worker, and then they go, wait a minute. I love this criminal justice side of this. And so I'm going to go in that direction, but the internships. Have been incredibly valuable because I actually get to go in and do the work and see it day to day and it's also the opportunity for them to say, this isn't a good fit for me and let me choose something else.

[00:30:57] **Christina Rouse:** Yeah, I think the power of just [00:31:00] internships in general cannot go on stated as it particularly relates to our field. I know when I was going through my master's program and so sure we didn't have a cast program at that time and I sincerely wish we had because I think I would have. been on the right track quicker, knowing what opportunities were available to me and having the ability to experience those rather than the internships I did go through was exactly what you said, Karla.

[00:31:28] **Christina Rouse:** It was, Oh, actually, I don't want to be a school social worker because I've seen that experience. And it wasn't until my additional internship where I even became aware of CACs and forensic interviewing. And that's where that piqued my interest. So I think we can all agree that internships in general are a great opportunity for students to really decide is this for me or not for me.

[00:31:53] **Christina Rouse:** And when we chatted with Addison, the CAST graduate, who did do their internship at a CAC, talked [00:32:00] about this very specific thing. So I'm going to play a snippet of what she said regarding the impact. Of being a cast intern and Didi, I would love to get your thoughts on her comments.



[00:32:10] **Addison Alexander:** I was able to kind of, first of all, get really important experience under my belt, but also test out how I was feeling emotionally about the work.

[00:32:20] **Addison Alexander:** And if it was still exciting for me, if I still felt passionate about it. One thing that we talk about a lot in our classes is burnout. And this is especially a field that has a lot of burnout. And so I wanted to be able to kind of gauge, can I handle this? Is this going to be. Life giving for me, or is this something that maybe I need to do in a different capacity?

[00:32:44] **DiDi Ellis:** Yeah, I think that's exactly what we experienced with Charity, the intern that we hired. She was young, right? She's still in college, so there was a lot of things to kind of process through with her. And so, when you hire a new employee, you're jumping in and you get a full payslip, right? No bones about it.[00:33:00]

[00:33:00] **DiDi Ellis:** Whereas with an internship, you just get to get your feet wet and then we kind of give you more assess that you can handle that. And so you're just treated differently, right? As an intern, there's a lot more care and consideration. Unfortunately, I hate to say it like that. It's not that we don't have care and consideration for our employees, but when we hire you for a full time gig.

[00:33:19] **DiDi Ellis:** We're expecting you to do the full time work, right? And so with the intern charity, we were able to just really process through things a little bit slower. And so when we hired her on full time, I feel like we had far less hiccups than we do with a normal brand new hire. And some of it, yes, has to do specifically with, she had just that foundational knowledge that being involved in those things.

[00:33:42] **DiDi Ellis:** Taskforce is provided, but I would say that more than just the course and the textbook, like you literally cannot value the experiential learning and the simulations and the day-to-day role that she had here at the Child Advocacy Center. That was so much more valuable than anything [00:34:00] she'll ever get out of a classroom.

[00:34:02] **DiDi Ellis:** So I would agree absolutely with what Addison said.

[00:34:05] **Christina Rouse:** So I think we've all kind of paved the road that our cast students are beneficial for. The CAC field. What advice or suggestions, Karla, could you give to our listeners who are hearing us be really excited about the benefits of CAST and might want to be looking at CAST courses and how they could implement that in maybe their own communities?

[00:34:29] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** I touched on this a little bit earlier, but I would say you absolutely have to be comfortable with the fact that this is not a quick solution. This is the long game. And it's not something that's going to happen overnight. Obviously, there are much better students who are hearing this. We know from our research that we are absolutely creating a generation of professionals better prepared to identify and respond to abuse.

[00:34:54] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** And we look at this and the CAST students versus the non CAST students in our research are [00:35:00] just heads above the others. Bye. It is something that takes time, and we work in a world where, particularly in the CDC world, where we're all writing grants that are usually for 12 months or 24 months, and this isn't going to fit in one of those little 12 month cycles.

[00:35:18] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** This is something that if a community wants to undertake it, it's going to absolutely be valuable and will change the practice, change the workforce, but you have to think long term. And I was fortunate that I have a phenomenal board of directors and a phenomenal membership of child advocacy centers that were really comfortable with taking on an initiative that we knew from the beginning it was going to take.

[00:35:45] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** Years and years to see the end result, but we're well on our way. I would also say that for anyone who's wanting to take this on at a college and university level or with a state chapter, you have to find champions at the school. [00:36:00] That's where we have found the most. And so, um, I think the biggest benefit is when we have that one person, that one professor, or this one dean that says, this is absolutely necessary.

[00:36:09] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** We have to do this because it can take some work with schools. You can't just go in and change curriculum. They have a whole committee and they have lots of bureaucracy around how do you change coursework and to add a course as well as. Getting the buy in to say, we promise you, you're going to fill the seat.

[00:36:27] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** It may be a little bit slow in the 1st class, but our students are the best recruiters for future cast courses that getting it off the ground may just take a little bit of work within the system of a university. And so you have to have that champion that can drive it and keep it on the forefront of the college and universities.

[00:36:47] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** So,

[00:36:47] **Christina Rouse:** CAS can be implemented at community college

[00:36:49] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** levels, correct? That's correct. So, we have a number of community colleges in our state, they've implemented the first CAS course. And then we have an articulation [00:37:00] agreement where that CAS course can then transfer, so the student can transfer that credit to the four year school.

[00:37:06] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** We also see that a lot of. Community colleges where you have professionals that are already working in the field, go back and get additional courses, and they're going through the community college to do. So, and we're looking this year at many of our community colleges want to add more than just that 1st course, and they may end up having the certificate.

[00:37:26] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** So, our schools will implement a certificate or a minor program, whether that's at the community college or at the 4 year school. But then to take that a step further, some of our post secondary schools are also adding it into their curriculum. So whether that's a law school or a medical school, the nursing program will take the concepts from CAS and then weave it into their existing curriculum so that they're getting that work.

[00:37:55] **Christina Rouse:** And Didi, what about at a local level, if the CAC directors, I would love to [00:38:00] have the opportunity for students in my community to attend CAST, but I'm not sure how to get that ball rolling. What suggestions do you have for them?

[00:38:09] **DiDi Ellis:** I think the biggest suggestion I would have is, who are the interns that you're getting to come to your Child Advocacy Center?

[00:38:14] **DiDi Ellis:** The vast majority of us get VOCA, the vast majority of us need volunteers, the vast majority of us get paid. And so, um, we do have a lot of work to do to help us manage that through interns from our local schools and universities. And so who are those contacts? A lot of times we've got facility agreements and supervision agreements with those folks.

[00:38:29] **DiDi Ellis:** Who are those contacts that you have at those local universities that you can begin having conversations with to say, there is a national model for how we can train and educate. This emerging workforce and there's potential. And again, I think what it does is it helps if your chapter wants to take on. A project like this, it helps to kind of pave the framework for here's a champion in my community.

[00:38:52] **DiDi Ellis:** There's somebody that already works with the Child Advocacy Center. We have seen such a benefit in just the work that the chapter has [00:39:00] done with CAST and how that dovetails and supports the Child Advocacy Center in us helping to foster and grow our relationships within all of those schools and different departments.

[00:39:11] **DiDi Ellis:** It helps to, as they are connected with the state chapter and through CAST, they begin looking for specific folks that they think would make great interns at the Child Advocacy Center. And so I can't even begin to describe the immense. Excitement that we have seen within our own organization of the benefit of cast in that way, which is a little a little different.

[00:39:35] **DiDi Ellis:** It's opened up opportunities to for us to go in and have access to students. They ask us to come in and partner with them on some of the content in the courses. Right? And so we come in and we're just a

guest speaker that covers a particular topic, but then. We've peaked the interest of the Child Advocacy Center movement.

[00:39:54] **DiDi Ellis:** We've peaked this multidisciplinary team model and this collaboration and communication and how [00:40:00] that can look. And so we get an opportunity to really yell about the good work that the CACs are doing in hopes that we can rally up some students that might be interested in this work. Because One day we will not be here and we need to make sure that we can grow some people that are just as passionate about this work as those of us that sit in these seats right now.

[00:40:21] **DiDi Ellis:** And so that has been something that we've really enjoyed is that partnership with the universities where we get to go meet with those students. And it's also translated into 1 of the medical schools is in our community. And so we have on regular rotation. Dio students that are in their 3rd and 4th years coming to the Child Advocacy Center, observing the processes of the Child Advocacy Center.

[00:40:45] **DiDi Ellis:** And when I think about it, it's just so beautiful to think that this doctor who is thinking that they want to be a pediatrician. Knows at a very basic knowledge what this work of the Child Advocacy Center does. So when, not if, but when they [00:41:00] encounter a kid that's experienced abuse and they know that that process of having to go to the Child Advocacy Center will be there, they can, at some base level knowledge, know how to explain that process to a child and family or at least know how to connect them to the appropriate resources.

[00:41:15] **DiDi Ellis:** And you cannot beat the value. And Karla said we've got to do better for our kids. You can't do better than that.

[00:41:22] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** To add to what DiDi just said, I think one of the values of having those DO students come through and see the Child Advocacy Center and now understand what a multidisciplinary team is all about, they now have confidence in the system response.

[00:41:36] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** And I think that's such a challenge for whether it's our teachers or our physicians or anybody else that's in a professional field that makes a report. What happens now? I've made this

call and I don't. Understand the next steps. And so that's when we see sometimes folks calling back and making multiple reports, or I think where there's an assumption that someone else isn't doing their job when in reality, if they [00:42:00] just understand the multidisciplinary response and the fact that there are all of these, systems that are going to spring into action.

[00:42:07] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** It changes the belief and the confidence that's coming out of that person who's now going to be a physician. And so maybe they're in Family Medicine and they make a report. They now understand the Child Advocacy Center. So yes, they can communicate it better to the family, but then there's also that confidence that somebody's actually taking action on the case.

[00:42:26] **Christina Rouse:** Didi, I love that you named this tertiary benefit of awareness. about the work of CECs and the work of MDTs. And when we talk about child abuse prevention, we talk a lot about awareness is key, right? How do we name it? How do we give language to people? How can we help them feel competent and confident to be able to handle these scenarios?

[00:42:49] **Christina Rouse:** So Karla, I would love to know, have you seen a shift in awareness or support for the movement and the model? After having implemented CAST, or does [00:43:00] that play a part in kind of that community involvement or awareness? 100%.

[00:43:05] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** I am so amazed by how widespread this now has become with the terminology when people are just talking about CAST, and we're talking with our partner agencies about hiring CAST students and what that looks like.

[00:43:21] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** And they're talking about, not just at the CAC, but some of our other state agencies are saying, And so what does that mean now for bringing them on and maybe they don't need as much intensive training in the beginning, or can we hire them at a benchmark? That's a little bit higher because they have this training.

[00:43:38] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** We are talking, of course, about this with all of our task forces that we work on, whether it's the Children's Justice Act task force, or our Supreme Court Commission task force on children. They're aware of what we're doing with child advocacy studies and there is. Such a support by all of our agencies to make this happen and to keep it going.

[00:43:59] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** I [00:44:00] think the other thing that I would say that is so impressive is the collaboration that's happening among the colleges and universities. When you have higher education, there's often a competition or drive for enrollment and. With the CAST program, these faculty members are coming in together, sharing ideas, they're collaborating with each other.

[00:44:24] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** We have regular support calls, like peer support calls or networking calls with our CAST faculty. They are sharing resources with each other. It is not the competition that we normally see among our colleges and universities, and I think it's because we all have this passion and we know that this is what's going to do better for kids in our state.

[00:44:44] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** For

[00:44:45] **DiDi Ellis:** And just to follow up on that, a very prime example of then how this loops in the Child Advocacy Center is. Monday in just three days, the universities, the school of social work heads will be at the table in Hattiesburg [00:45:00] discussing how to work with social work programs and curriculum and all the things the Child Advocacy Center has been asked to come and assist in sharing about the Child Advocacy Centers, the movement of the multidisciplinary teams, and then also talking through a little bit about what this experiential learning looks like through CAS curriculum and simulations and different things like that.

[00:45:19] **DiDi Ellis:** And so it's just unique opportunities at every turn for us to continue to educate and engage all those that we need to in order to move this work along.

[00:45:31] **Christina Rouse:** I know sometimes when we share these innovative practices or these projects that we know are going to move the needle in the field. Sometimes our listeners might feel like those undertakings are too big or too large, or maybe they just don't have the ability based off of resources or structure or whatever we know exists in our field.

[00:45:51] **Christina Rouse:** What are some other recruitment strategies that have been effective in attracting diverse candidates for future CEC [00:46:00] employees?

[00:46:01] **DiDi Ellis:** I go back to one of the things that I said is that I think that for us, what's worked really well is forging a really strong relationship at the university level with, say, the school of social work.

[00:46:13] **DiDi Ellis:** So, as a director, can you identify where your largest source of interns are coming from? Do you have a good relationship with the person over those offsite placements? Do you have a good relationship with the dean? Anybody within that department, if you don't, who could you just pick one? Of course, there's so many other opportunities than just social work.

[00:46:32] **DiDi Ellis:** There's criminal justice. There's at the master's graduate level. There's counseling. There's lots of opportunities. But if you needed to take one next step, what could you do? Could you pick one of those? And just begin developing a relationship so that they can help kind of earmark students that would be good fits for your organization instead of just sending any and all folks to the CAC that we know won't pan out, right?

[00:46:58] **DiDi Ellis:** We know that they won't all be [00:47:00] great fits, but they can kind of help create a buffer. The CAC, you can help kind of create a buffer and hopefully you can streamline those that are coming to have the biggest impact, right? The biggest opportunity for a potential hire, that sort of thing. And I think for us, what's worked is forging those relationships.



[00:47:17] **DiDi Ellis:** And I think everybody can do that easily, but just picking one, one department that you would want to enhance and improve that relationship with.

[00:47:26] **Christina Rouse:** And I would say too, that you named earlier the difference of having a paid internship versus Unpaid and what opportunities that is for students in the field, would you say that just considering making that change of paid versus an unpaid internship?

[00:47:44] **DiDi Ellis:** Absolutely. Obviously, funding's tight. We were fortunate to have that kind of shoveled down to us through the opportunity through the chapter. But it is something that we have actually considered. And so very specifically for us, we've targeted a group that we've not been super close to is the marriage [00:48:00] and family department at the University of Southern Miss.

[00:48:02] **DiDi Ellis:** And so we have really kind of considered with them what it would take to have a grad level that would be a paid internship opportunity. So that obviously they could get the support that they need, but that's 1 of those areas that we're trying to build that relationship. And then I'm connecting them back with the children's advocacy centers of Mississippi to say, hey, I think they're interested in figuring out how to integrate cast curriculum into their current curriculum.

[00:48:26] **DiDi Ellis:** And so it's such a relationship thing. I feel like so together on this, because we've got them saying, we want to send students to you. Do you have any money? And I'm saying, I don't know, let me go check. But I think that we've definitely found the value in that and have asked them, what would it cost us?

[00:48:42] **DiDi Ellis:** Could we turn any of our revenue from something else, a fundraiser? Could we earmark this fundraiser to pay for a grad level marriage and family therapist to be in our facility to provide mental health services to clients? And again, that's a much more cost effective method than a contract therapist or [00:49:00] a full time employee that's providing therapy.

[00:49:03] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** It makes the CAC more competitive. And although they may not have been the first place that the students would have thought about to go to work, there aren't that many paid internships. And so suddenly you have a paid internship, there's a little more competition for that. Position and so then they can really set up interviews and get kind of the best of the best from the programs that are coming out.

[00:49:29] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** And so it's a really when when the students getting a paid internship, they're getting a window into the realities of this work. They're getting to do the work that's in their field. And then they are getting. A really high quality student coming through that is a cast student that has that training and then you develop that relationship.

[00:49:50] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** And so they know before they send an offer. If they're going to send an offer to hire them, they know the type of work ethic they have. They know their ability. And so [00:50:00] our hope is that then we're reducing that turnover and they're not going to have that drain on resources when you suddenly two years into this now have lost an employee because they truly knew what they were getting into and had a passion for that work when they came in through an internship at the CAC.

[00:50:17] **Christina Rouse:** Karla, what recruitment strategies have you seen prior to CASB implemented that have worked really well for CACs looking for those future professionals?

[00:50:28] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** Prior to the implementation of PAST. We're in a rural state. So a lot of that is about relationships. It is then what's valuable is the connection with the colleges and universities and seeing who is graduating and as they're having those departments publicize that it's also been those that are out in the field that do want to make a shift and you have to look at why they are making that shift.

[00:50:52] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** But are they looking for. Another experience beyond what they have already been involved in. And, [00:51:00] of course, where we are today. I mean, again, we're 10 years into this. So, I think you have opportunities now through technology in a way

that we didn't have 10 years ago. So, it is just a completely different way of recruiting now post implementation of cast and before.

[00:51:18] **Christina Rouse:** So, in closing, I'd like to kind of wrap us up. We've addressed high turnover in the CSE field and that that's not just about the numbers, it's about the real impact that staff have on the children's lives and the dedicated professionals who serve them. So, Karla and Didi, what's been one experience that you've had that has highlighted the benefit of the CAST program that we haven't named yet that you want to share?

[00:51:45] **Christina Rouse:** Thank you. There are so

[00:51:46] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** many. It's hard to narrow it down to one. I mean, and you can tell we love CAFs in Mississippi and we're really passionate about this. But I will share a story that I think highlights the value of this. And as Dede talked [00:52:00] about, that she has a relationship with the DO school in her area.

[00:52:04] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** And that school sent some students to what they call CEMWAR. So here they are, medical students. We went to a simulation competition that was in another part of the country. And so we had students, teens from all over the country, various medical schools, DO schools, going to this sim war. And they were given a case that they had to work through and then have a diagnosis there at the end.

[00:52:29] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** And as they went through it, they quickly identified that the child had experienced trauma. And then ultimately diagnosed it as child abuse and said the child has been abused and we're able to explain why they were the only ones who identified it as child abuse. That was the outcome that was the right finding in that case.

[00:52:50] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** Well, I think that shows the benefit, but it also shows the need. How phenomenal that they were able to integrate these CAST concepts [00:53:00] into the DO school and that the students came out and that they were able to quickly identify that this child had experienced trauma and then ultimately it linked back to child abuse.

[00:53:11] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** But at the same time, what a need that they were the only team that was there that was able to identify that as abuse. So it's exciting when they came back and of course we heard this. We were just thrilled for them that this is why we're doing this. This is why we're implementing CAPS because now we do have professionals that are going to be out there.

[00:53:29] **Karla Steckler Tye, LPC:** They're going to be able to identify abuse. DiDi, what about you?

[00:53:33] **DiDi Ellis:** I wish I had a different example than the DA school, but that's actually the one that I had put in my head. Not the exact same example, but the same Group so what stands out to me is we were actually invited to come and help facilitate a simulation in the classroom and we got to sit back and watch these.

[00:53:50] **DiDi Ellis:** Emerging doctors play out the simulation on a child abuse case, and it really struck me watching the level of frustration [00:54:00] that the students experienced. Like one of the barriers in the particular simulation was that the child, his primary language wasn't English. And so what you see is them trying to navigate, how do we even find a translator?

[00:54:11] **DiDi Ellis:** If we were in the hospital setting, how would we even do that? Then it goes on to we believe that the child's been abused, but we've got the caregiver situation. We don't know who the abuser is. And I remember the student just stopping. He was acting in the role of the doctor and he just stops in the middle of the simulation and he was, I literally don't know what to do.

[00:54:31] **DiDi Ellis:** I don't know what I can and cannot say to this family. I do not know what I need to do in order to take care of this kid. To me, like I have chills thinking about it because it's not just the DO students. It's not just emerging doctors. It's every one of us. It's teachers. It's culinary students. It's.

[00:54:48] **DiDi Ellis:** Anybody, we all have access to children, whether they're our personal children or their parents, we're aunts or uncles,

whatever we are to these children, we all have access to them. And without knowledge [00:55:00] about child abuse and how to identify and respond to it, we cannot protect these children. And so to be able to say, like, I don't know what to do, but then to have something to immediately say, And teach.

[00:55:13] **DiDi Ellis:** This is what you do. It's just so impactful.

[00:55:17] **Christina Rouse:** Now that we've heard from Karla and Didi about the power of the CAST program, let's wrap up this conversation hearing from Addison Alexander, a graduate of CAST, about what she found so valuable about her experience.

[00:55:32] **Addison Alexander:** I had such a special experience in that class and was able to just kind of experience college in a way that I hadn't yet in the CAS courses.

[00:55:42] **Addison Alexander:** There was just so much within it that we were able to explore. There are so many factors of this profession that we got to look into, and then all of the opportunities it provided, all the different professionals that we heard from. It was just so, so cool. It was also [00:56:00] So, amazing to have students from other majors come into our classes and offer their perspective.

[00:56:06] **Addison Alexander:** So, pulling all of that away from cast. Was just kind of invaluable to who I was as a student, because it sort of pushed me to want to be that pumped up about. My career in general to take this kind of passion and excitement I found in this class and then go on to my actual real job and be like, I can do that here too.

[00:56:31] **Addison Alexander:** I can listen to these other perspectives, put it together, find a better way to do things, make connections, advocate for how important this is, and just keep kind of this momentum going. So I think that has been very cool and very special.

[00:56:49] **Christina Rouse:** As Peter Drucker reminds us, the best way to predict the future is to create it.

[00:56:54] **Christina Rouse:** Reflect on what you've heard, identify where you can contribute to the future pathways of [00:57:00] CAC professionals, and take that first step. Your actions today could be the difference tomorrow. Thank you for joining us for a thought provoking conversation. Much appreciation for our guests on this episode.

[00:57:14] **Christina Rouse:** Remember, in the moments between episodes, look for the invisible threads that connect you to your purpose. If what you heard sparked your curiosity to learn more, hit the subscribe button and follow us on Facebook and LinkedIn at Southern Regional Children's Advocacy Center for more learning content.

[00:57:32] **Christina Rouse:** All resources mentioned in this podcast are linked in the show notes below the SRCC. Exchange Podcast is made possible through the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, US Department of Justice under award number one five PJ DP 22 GK 0 3 0 5 9 JJ vo. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed [00:58:00] in this podcast are those of the guests and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice.

[00:58:06] **Christina Rouse:** The SRCEC Exchange Podcast Season 3 is hosted by me, Christina Rouse, and produced by Peachtree Sound. Music provided by Midnight Dream.