

OUR TOWNS

Presentation highlights how to detect, report child abuse

By JUDITH
O'HARA BALFE

judithb@millertonnews.com

MILLERTON — In one hour at a presentation at North East Community Center (NECC), a group of 12 people learned about child abuse, how to detect it, and what to do about it once it is discovered.

The presentation on Tuesday, June 20, was conducted by Richard Keller-Coffey from the Center for the Prevention of Child Abuse in Poughkeepsie. Keller-Coffey is a retired schoolteacher with over 30 years' experience, and is serving his fourth term on the Westchester Central School District Board of Education.

The opening of the presentation featured a photo montage of children's faces, with Keller-Coffey pointing out one in particular and stating, "That little fellow died of starvation." From there, the many faces of child abuse were laid

bare: neglect, emotional and psychological abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse.

"The demographics don't matter" because abuse in all its forms comes from varied places. Statistics show that there are 1,000 to 1,100 cases of child abuse taking place every day in Dutchess County. In New York state, 30% of abuse is at the hands of a parent or an older sibling, and 90% of abuse comes from people who are known and trusted, i.e., neighbors, other family members, family friends, church members or leaders, scout leaders and others who have standing in our communities.

There are many signs of abuse. Outward signs of neglect are signs that a child's basic needs are not being met: a child not kept clean, not properly dressed, possibly hungry most of the time, or either withdrawing or craving attention. There can be many



PHOTO BY JUDITH O'HARA BALFE

From left: Katie Cariello, School-to-Work coordinator, Brandon Wolfe, youth program director, and Christine Sergent, executive director—all of North East Community Center—asking questions of Richard Keller-Coffey of the Center for the Prevention of Child Abuse in Poughkeepsie after he made a presentation at NECC on detecting and reporting child abuse on Tuesday, June 20.

reasons for what looks like neglect, including poverty, drug or alcohol addiction on the part of parents or caregivers, mental illness, and depression. Burns, bruises or other physical signs of abuse can be kept

hidden. The child may become abnormally on alert, fearing for the next blow; and a child flinching can be tell-tale.

There are signs in cases of sexual abuse, as well. Does the child have inappropriate in-

formation for their age? Does the child dress inappropriately or provocatively at a young age? Missing school can be a factor, as can be a fear of falling asleep. Fatigue as well as the use and abuse of alcohol or drugs can be signs of sexual or other forms of abuse.

Sexual abuse can lead to changing behaviors, such as a child becoming extremely passive. There may be a slide in hygiene, or the child may commence washing too much. Bed wetting can also be a sign. Unsupervised siblings can be a problem and lead to incest.

Emotional and psychological abuse sometimes take a back seat to other more immediate and deadly forms of abuse, but they can wreak havoc on a child's life and well-being. There is stress and fear, and a child might talk badly about themselves. They can also exhibit extreme behaviors, can be antisocial,

get into or initiate fights, and abuse others. They may also be unattached to a parent or parents and show compulsive behaviors and disorders.

The presentation made it clear that one's job is not to investigate, but to report abuse when one sees it. If a child discloses to you that they are being abused, stay calm and listen. Be honest and supportive, but don't interrogate. When abuse is not reported, when it is allowed to continue, in the adult, it can cause depression, drug and/or alcohol abuse, low self-esteem and suicidal thoughts.

The theme of the presentation was to be a hero for kids: If you don't make the call, the abuse will continue. Keller-Coffey made certain that people are aware that, in the case of immediate danger, always call 911. The hotline for unmandated reporting is 800-342-3720 and for mandated reporting, 800-635-1522.