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More than 300 offer support at a For the Child fundraiser

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LONG BEACH -- At any hour, Meg Graham could get an emergency page notifying her that a child has been sexually assaulted.

When the page comes, Graham, a trained volunteer with the Child Abuse Response Team, will rush down to the hospital, where she counsels and comforts the victim with a bag of toys and snacks.

In her eight months as a volunteer for CART, Graham has responded to more than a dozen cases.

"Seeing how young some of them are, I think that has affected me the most," she said.

CART is one of several programs in For The Child, a Long Beach-based nonprofit that aims to prevent child abuse and provide treatment for victims and their families.

Established in 1996, For The Child provides services for more than 700 children and their parents each year at two locations on Long Beach Boulevard and California Avenue. From 2006 to 2007, the CART team aided 123 children and adolescent victims of sexual assault.

On Wednesday, more than 300 people, including city officials like Mayor Bob Foster, packed into the downtown Hyatt Hotel for the nonprofit's seventh annual breakfast fundraiser.

The program included the voices of anonymous teens using their stories and the written testimonials from three mothers whose children survived abuse.

Keynote speaker Robert Martin, a former commanding officer for the Los Angeles Police Department's Detective Headquarters Division and author of the books "The Gift of Fear" and "Protecting The Gift," shared his expertise on warning signs and strategies for keeping children safe.

Executive Director Michele Winterstein said the fundraiser brings in about \$50,000 a year in private donations.

About 20 percent of the organization's \$2 million annual budget is privately funded, she said, while the rest is generated through grants and government funding.

Although money has been tight, Winterstein said the organization was finally able to renovate and expand its California Avenue location in February. Before that, many children had to be put on a waiting list for up to three months, she said.

The location now includes a larger waiting room and eight new offices for services such as child abuse and neglect counseling, mental health care and Parent Child Interaction Therapy. She hopes to hire more therapists and increase services by up to 40 percent.

A licensed clinical psychologist, Winterstein has seen many tough cases over the years. About 25 to 30 percent of the cases are children under 6, she said.

One case that sticks in her mind was a 2-year-old girl who was raped by her mother's boyfriend and came into the center with a "rainbow" of bruises covering her back.

After receiving intense therapy over the next two years, the little girl left the center a happy and healthy child, known for painting beautiful pictures.

Winterstein still has one of the girl's pictures on her office wall.

"I keep it up there to remind me that a child can go through hell and survive," she said. "We're trying to get them to walk out of here whole."

Winterstein also emphasized counseling and coaching for parents, especially parents who has gone through traumatic childhoods themselves.

"People's hearts are always touched by the more severe stories," she said. "But some of the best success stories are families that come in and get help before they ever get to that point."

For more information on For The Child or to volunteer for the CART program, visit www.forthethechild.org or call 562-422-8472.

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