

## Putting Kids First

Pioneering child advocacy center **Project Harmony** runs on a collaborative model, giving kids a safer way to address trauma and begin healing.

**W**hen Omaha-based Project Harmony was founded in 1996, it wasn't uncommon for a child suffering from abuse to have to tell their experience up to 15 times before getting help. This was typically followed by a school assessment, a police statement, and then undergoing a physical at a hospital.

One of just 30 child advocacy centers at the time, Project Harmony's goal was to streamline the response process so victims of abuse only have to tell their experience once. The idea, says Executive Director Gene Klein, LCSW, was to bring everyone who could help abused kids—from nonprofits to state and federal government agencies—together under one roof.

What began as five employees serving 65 children annually has grown into a thriving organization with 125 employees and 400 on-site professionals representing the city, county, and state, as well as law enforcement, child protective services, and medical providers. In 2023 alone, Project Harmony worked with over 8,500 children and trained over 20,000 people worldwide.

"We embrace the different approaches each organization brings to the table," says Klein, "and we use those differences to grow and evolve. Our goal is to make sure each child we see gets the best from everyone." This collaborative model has been so successful that today there are nearly 1,000 similar child advocacy centers across the globe.

### Targeting Abuse

Project Harmony works to get ahead of child abuse through programs like Connections, a voluntary, school-based mental health program that encourages schools and families to



proactively access mental health services for children exposed to trauma. The organization also offers extensive training and educational programming.

"The more knowledge and skill responders have the better prepared they will be to recognize and respond to abuse," says Klein.

Project Harmony is laser-focused on the growing problem of sex trafficking missing youth, who are at a higher risk of being exploited. The organization's coordinated response to the problem includes bringing missing youth through Project Harmony.

"We engage their family in the conversation to stabilize them, getting them back on their feet as a family," he says.

After 28 years serving Omaha kids, Project Harmony prides itself on teaching kids what happened to them doesn't define them or limit their potential.

Committed to building trust with community members and the people who access the organization's programming, Project Harmony has thrived because of Omaha's off-the-charts culture of philanthropy.

"Children have to trust that the people caring for them will respond consistently and compassionately, and that the systems we have in place will work," concludes Klein. "Community philanthropy fills in the gaps where government assistance starts and ends. Our work is only possible because of the culture we live in."

  
**Project  
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