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### The Crisis Center of Tampa Bay Helps Those in Need

2-1-1 is the number to call for information and crisis counseling

By **Deborah Bostock-Kelley** March 8, 2011

Last year, 120,000 Hillsborough County residents found information, education and sometimes even a lifeline by dialing three numbers to reach the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay: 2-1-1.

The center offers services for rape victims, substance abuse help and counseling services for those who call.

Carissa Caricato, director of marketing and communications for the Crisis Center, said that unlike other counties where 2-1-1 is strictly informational, Hillsborough County's 2-1-1 officials try to give callers more than just an education.

"We are a blended crisis center," she said. "We provide free, confidential crisis counseling, as well as information and referrals to over 3,500 community resources."

The Crisis Center, located at 1 Crisis Center Plaza, is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

The Crisis Center (<http://www.crisiscenter.com/>) is the substance abuse hotline for Florida, and also provides free daily safety and reassurance calls to homebound elderly residents and adults with disabilities who live alone, have no available support system, or those who are TTD/TTY or Florida Relay dependent.

Staff and volunteers must go through a rigorous training program to prepare them for what might be on the other end of a phone call.

"We get 30 to 40 suicide calls a week," Caricato said. "Our counselors are trained to listen, not just offer a telephone number. Connection is the most important."

Though the issue of teen suicide has been heightened by recent bully-related events, Carissa explains that statistics show a surprising result. White men over 65 are the primary group to attempt and succeed suicide by lethal means.

"With teenagers, it's often an accident," Caricato said. "A cry for help."

Counseling is provided for children, teens, and adults on-site at a sliding scale, but Caricato said, "We won't refuse anyone."

The Crisis Center is a maze of doors and long hallways adorned with positive messages, murals, children's art, painted T-shirts and beautiful black and white portraits. Bright, welcoming rooms for counseling, conversation, and therapy.

Through one set of doors is a cheery room with a comfy sofa and magazines that sit on top of the coffee table. This is the entrance to the Crisis Center's Sexual Assault Services, since the Crisis Center is the primary rape crisis center for Hillsborough County.

No longer does a rape victim in Hillsborough County have to relieve the crime while waiting with a police officer in the emergency room for treatment. Now, law enforcement brings the victim directly to the Crisis Center, where nurses offer forensic medical exams, at no cost, and caring counsel provided by trained crisis counselors.

Evidence is kept on file for up to a year, and nurses act as expert witnesses if the victim goes to court. An advocate service is provided free of charge, and offers support through the entire legal process.

"As soon as woman walks through the door, she goes from being a victim to a survivor. We help her take her life back," Caricato said. "After the exam, we offer a shower and a change of clothes. We ask them what color toothbrush? What type of shampoo? What towel? Decisions as simple as that help give them back control."

The Crisis Center Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/#!/CrisisCenterofTampaBay>) page says that they are "always in need of new clothing for men and women, teen to adult, to prevent victims from feeling even more vulnerable after an attack because clothing has been confiscated as evidence."

The center also hosts events.

April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month, and the Crisis Center will host **Lauren Book** ([http://www.laurenskids.org/events\\_walk.shtml](http://www.laurenskids.org/events_walk.shtml)), an author and advocate who is walking from the Florida Keys to Tallahassee to raise awareness about sexual assault. Lauren will be an honored guest at the Crisis Center's community meet and greet Open House on April 6.

On April 16 in Hyde Park Village, the Crisis Center will take part in **Take Back the Night** (<http://www.svftampabay.com/takebackthenight.htm>), an interactive event that creates awareness, empowers survivors and educates the community about sexual violence.

Other services provided by the Crisis Center include a food pantry, trauma recovery services; child and family safety & family stabilization; free STD/HIV testing; travelers aid at the airport, and transcare, an EMS service for the City of Tampa.

To volunteer or learn more about these services, call 2-1-1, or visit [www.crisiscenter.com](http://www.crisiscenter.com) (<http://www.crisiscenter.org/>).



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