

# History of C.A.R.E.

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The Center for Abuse and Rape Emergencies, Inc. of Charlotte County began operating as the Charlotte County Rape Crisis Center in May of 1983.

Bill Riley and Jane Brenner had the vision; they organized and trained volunteers to help victims of sexual assault deal with the trauma they experienced.

Volunteers included Phil Jones, Esq. who served as the first Board Chair, Dr. Gerald Ross, Sheriff Glen Sapp, and members of the Zonta Club of Punta Gorda — Port Charlotte.

In 1985, founding Board member Paula Hess was appointed Shelter Acquisition Chairman. Working with Don R. Witter, President of First Federal of Charlotte County, a 2-year lease was arranged for the Center, at \$1.00 per year, for a small two-bedroom house that was slated to be demolished.

Calls were coming in from victims of domestic violence to the crisis line, and in May 1985, the organization was renamed The Center for Abuse and Rape Emergencies, Inc. (C.A.R.E.). Nancy Lisby, another founding Board member, served as the volunteer Executive Director of the shelter in the early days.

Efforts to replace the temporary shelter with a permanent facility began immediately. Requests to the City of Punta Gorda and Charlotte County were made for Federal Revenue Sharing Funds. Mayor John Beck and the City Council approved \$10,000 towards building or buying a suitable facility. C.A.R.E. was able to meet the challenge of building a specially designed shelter on public property supported by county funding.

As a result of continuing and steadfast community support, C.A.R.E. has operated a dual-service victims' service center since 1987. A single-family residence was built as a transitional housing unit for clients in 2002, with help from the City of Punta Gorda and in partnership with Habitat for Humanity.

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Generous and committed women of the community organized a social and fundraising arm of C.A.R.E. in 2003 named the C.A.R.E. Auxiliary Society. Members plan events to raise funds to “help the kids at C.A.R.E.” including golf and fishing tournaments, chef cooking demonstrations, trivia and dart competitions, and their signature annual luncheon.

A State of Florida Capital Improvement Grant was awarded to C.A.R.E. in 2003. Following Hurricane Charley, the Board of County Commissioners under the leadership of Sarah Devos, approved supplementary SHIP funding to upgrade the 24-bed shelter and added individual counseling rooms to serve walk-in clients.

A partnership was established in Charlotte County Environmental and Extension Services in 2004 to start Project ReUse to benefit C.A.R.E. Items at the ReUse Store are available to C.A.R.E. clients free-of-charge, and the profits from items sold add to unrestricted funds to provide services to survivors in Charlotte County.

The following year, C.A.R.E. entered a partnership with The United Way of Charlotte County and Charlotte County Human Services to provide 2-1-1 non-emergency information and referrals to community residents.

In 2011, the C.A.R.E. Board pledged to build and support financial sustainability by building our endowment. The Chief Advancement Officer Linda Lusk focuses on securing legacy gifts, planned giving education, and founded the legacy society, the Circle of Compassion. A community action team was formed to raise awareness in the community and depends on citizens and community leaders to serve as ambassadors of C.A.R.E.

Early in 2016, Karen McElhaney assumed the role of Executive Director for C.A.R.E. Originally from Bethel Park, Pennsylvania, Karen attended the University of Pittsburgh where she graduated with her Bachelors degree in Psychology. Karen then went on to receive her Masters degree in Human Services from Capella University. In 2012, Karen and her family decided to relocate to Charlotte County area from Ohio. She has spent more than 20 years working for non-profits, helping make a difference in countless lives.

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The original kitchen was fully renovated by reconfiguring storage and replacing the worn cabinets, a new Board Room and offices were constructed, and the children's play area was expanded. The Board funded a beautification project which enhanced security of the facility, and completed the interior courtyard and landscaping.

Additional services to benefit survivors were added in 2017. C.A.R.E. offers multiple support groups for survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence, as well as financial literacy. An Economic Justice program provides training to clients to aid in personal development in the areas of finance and banking, nutrition and cooking, resume writing and preparing for job interviews. These learning opportunities prepare survivors to transition to greater independence and set them up for personal success.

For more than 35 years, Charlotte County has proudly supported this home grown, grass-roots organization which serves to help people who are hurting to heal and thrive. Charlotte County is C.A.R.E.