

Every Bit of It Is Relational:  
An Interview with Carrie Little,  
Executive Director, Children's Advocacy Centers of Oklahoma

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NCARC's Jennifer Calder interviewed Carrie Little, the Children's Advocacy Centers of Oklahoma (CACO) Executive Director, to discuss the operations of a state CAC chapter and how chapters work with individual multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) and CACs to promote the CAC model. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

**Could you tell us a little about how you got started working with child advocacy centers?**

I started in this field a long time ago, as a researcher right out of undergraduate school, working for the State of Oklahoma's Domestic Violence Fatality Review Board. So as a young person, I was traveling all over the 77 counties of Oklahoma gathering case information regarding domestic violence and homicides. That opened my eyes in a very stark way to the needs of victims of crime across the state, and the needs of women and children, in particular.

That experience as a very young professional shaped the trajectory of my career. I moved into the states of California and Colorado,

working in direct services as a victim advocate. I worked in Denver at a domestic violence shelter and for a police department right outside of Denver as a victim advocate alongside the Persons Crimes unit. Then, I moved to California and worked for a district attorney's office in Ventura County, north of Los Angeles, providing victim services to the domestic violence courtroom and the restraining order courtroom. There I gained a lot of knowledge about what it's like to work one-on-one with victims of crime. I was primarily working with women, and as a result of that, also with children.

When I moved back to Oklahoma, I got a job as the Executive Director for a rural CAC outside of Oklahoma City, in a town called El Reno, in Canadian County. There I learned about multidisciplinary teams, how the law in Oklahoma reads, and how we work with our communities to support child victims of crime.



### **How did you move from working with an individual CAC to working with your state chapter?**

I didn't go straight from the El Reno CAC to this position. I moved to Tulsa in 2009 and worked in community mental health. I was a little bit burned out at that time by working with reactive situations in criminal justice, so I wanted to focus more on prevention. I taught healthy relationship classes around the community, in hopes that those would put families on a trajectory of healing any kind of maltreatment that had already happened in their home and preventing anything from happening in the future. I moved into administrative roles after that, still working in the nonprofit sector. And then a dear friend of mine, who is the Executive Director of the Child Advocacy Network here in Tulsa, referred me to this shop. She gave me a job description at the end of 2019 and said, "I think you'd be a good fit for this, and we'd love to have you back in the CAC world."

I looked at the CACO job description, knowing that it would be a big leap to go from sort of a mid-sized nonprofit in an administrative role back into a very small nonprofit working towards building networks and supports for CACs. I felt like that was a good fit, and I still do feel like it's a good fit. I love my job.

### **The end of 2019—that sounds like maybe a momentous time to be applying for a new job. You must have had some challenges right at the start.**

I started with CACO in March of 2020, about two weeks before the whole world was like, "Wait a second. What is COVID? And what is a pandemic?" That first year, I had this whole beautiful 90-day plan to go out and see all the people and meet all the CAC staff across the State of Oklahoma. It then switched to virtual, and we had to pivot. But what that brought us

was the ability to get to know each other a whole lot more quickly, because it would have taken me a long time to drive around the whole state.

And it wasn't COVID alone. Alongside COVID, a huge Supreme Court ruling called *McGirt v. Oklahoma* shifted how we do all kinds of things here in Oklahoma.

[See [NCARC Practice Brief 15](#) for more information about the *McGirt v. Oklahoma* ruling.]

That was 2020. That was my introduction to working not only with our already accredited CACs but also with those communities that might want to develop a CAC. And also my introduction to really intimately working with our Native nations here in Oklahoma.

### **Could you tell us a little bit about the work you do now? Maybe some of the main functions of a state chapter?**

Our primary function at CACO is to provide training and technical support to CACs. But really, the glue that holds all of that together is our membership network...networking and meeting each other. We hold space for facilitating meetings, for brainstorming and talking, for the CAC leadership around the state and other staff at CACs to connect with one another in meaningful ways, whether that be through forensic interview peer support networks or victim advocacy peer support networks, or CAC leadership getting together and regularly talking through issues. As a membership organization, the most important thing we do is convening people and putting the right people in the right room together.

### **When you convene people like this, are there any topics that consistently come up? Any common needs that you're seeing across your different member CACs?**

That's a really good question. Let me back up a minute, though. As an accredited chapter of the National Children's Alliance, there are certain things that we have to do to maintain that accreditation. And one of the things is to be really specific about how we provide support to our membership and how that's organized and facilitated. As a state chapter, we take what NCA gives us as our rules, and then we shape that around the needs of the community. One way that I gather information about the needs of the community—and this is required by our accreditation—is to survey our membership regularly.

In the fall of every year, I send out our largest survey, which informs us at the state chapter level about what people at individual CACs are projecting as possible needs for the next calendar year. What kinds of trainings do you need? Which of your staff need trainings? Which of those roles need the most support? And how can we do that? What are we doing well? What can we do better? Those are the kinds of questions we ask.

Through that survey process, I am hearing that we need really specific wraparound training and technical support around our accreditation standards for CACs, but also for our MDTs working together. We need to have a robust way of wrapping support and education around them. The other thing that I have heard loud and clear is that we need support for our staff at a statewide level. So we began two years ago the forensic interview peer group that I mentioned earlier. These groups are for our forensic interviewers connected not only to CACs but also to teams that don't operate with a CAC. And we did a similar thing for our victim advocates across the state.

**Can you give us a sense of what the process looks like when you start to engage with**

**CACs, helping them understand accreditation and supporting them through that process?**

It can take a long time. That is one of the very first things we talk about with people. We want to set realistic expectations because the process is long, and the process is complicated, and people get frustrated.

We're working with people in the community, either connected to an already existing MDT or connected in some other way to our system. But they're holding multiple roles in the community themselves. And so when we talk about how we provide support, one of the reasons why we have different levels of training, different time frames for trainings, is because we're trying to meet people wherever they are. We try and build a menu of supports. We talk with communities, and there's not really a template. It's never the same conversation. It can include the same information about CACs, but every conversation is different.

And they're specific to Oklahoma. All of our states operate differently with multidisciplinary team processes. No one state looks exactly like another. In Oklahoma, we have a system in place in which we, as a state chapter, work with CACs, but there's a whole other system of support led by a state agency called the Oklahoma Commission on Children and Youth that has oversight over what we call our freestanding multidisciplinary teams. Oklahoma state statute requires that all of the 77 counties in the state have to be covered by a multidisciplinary team joint investigative process. That's led by our district attorneys' offices. Then, when an MDT is established, that process for developing that freestanding MDT is led by that state agency. And then CACO interacts with them to provide more information about what to do now that you have an MDT. What's next? There's a whole

next level. And that's where we start to interact with people.

Or sometimes there are some issues with the MDT we might need to address. The very first thing we talk about with people when they call us is, "Are you already connected to a multidisciplinary team?" You might not know it. There are only a couple of counties in the State of Oklahoma that aren't officially covered by an MDT. So when I get a phone call, that person is probably already connected to an MDT and just doesn't know it, or the MDT is maybe fractured in some way. Maybe there's siloed information, siloed work processes. So we first work to put those pieces together and then build on that for education, to get to the next level.

**I want to transition a little bit and talk about your work with Oklahoma's Native nations. What can you tell us about your experiences as a non-Native person working in Indian country? What has been helpful to you in building partnerships?**

I think it's important for people to know how immersed we already were in Oklahoma with our sovereign nations. There were already connections between sovereign nations and CACs. There already were MOUs, and also there are lots of Native staff members at CACs across the state. My husband is a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation. So if we had had children, our children would be citizens of the Chickasaw nation.

And since coming on board here, and certainly since the *McGirt* ruling, the main thing that has informed how I view this work in general has been really shaped by my reaching out to those people in our CACs who I know to be a citizen of a sovereign nation.

**Just to clarify for our readers: the change that happened with McGirt, related to CAC**

**work, is that the Native nations in Oklahoma all had an immediate change in the size of the jurisdictions they are responsible for in terms of criminal investigations, right? So in the world of CACs, where you might have previously had counties where the state had jurisdiction and the CAC would be working with maybe a county prosecutor, now the Tribes are responsible for those investigations and prosecutions that are at the center of the CAC model. And this change pertains to five nations whose lands constitute almost the entire eastern half of the state.**

Correct. It's a really big change. So in the last two years I've read more books and listened to more podcasts, watched more documentaries related to sovereign nation issues than I ever have before. I wish I had done that a long time ago. It is crazy to me that this is the first time I've really immersed myself. I live in the city of Collinsville, Oklahoma, outside of Tulsa. But we sit on the Cherokee reservation. So I'm sitting in my house right now in my home office on Cherokee land. I follow the Cherokee Nation on social media, and I pay attention to the things that are happening around me. I've tried to listen rather than talk. I try to talk to people I know who are connected to their communities in really specific ways. And I really appreciate the openness I have found in people. When you ask people about their culture, why things are happening, what their perspective is, people want to talk to you about that. Tell me about your community, tell me about your culture, tell me about your kids, your family, your mom, your dad, your grandma. And that's where that learning happens. That's where that growth happens: with listening.

**I know you were involved with supporting the Choctaw Nation's development of an MDT and a CAC. They recently opened their first CAC location and will be opening a second one soon. We talked to Gina South, a**

**prosecutor from the Choctaw Nation who has spearheaded that effort, about the process of developing a Tribal MDT and CAC. I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about how that process looked from your perspective?**

Part of the story at Choctaw Nation is that it is geographically so large. It's a huge section of Oklahoma. There are four prosecutorial districts that share geography with the nation, and there were already four CACs that had been established and accredited for those districts. And one thing that we do for growth and development is assess. When Gina and I started talking about how they were starting an MDT and planning on developing a CAC, we talked about how those four CACs that share geography with the Choctaw Nation had MDT members from the nation, whether that be Tribal law enforcement, prosecutors, certainly Indian Child Welfare workers working alongside State child welfare. So there were good relationships. And Gina was very specific in her understanding that we didn't want to put one CAC right next to another one. We wanted to situate the nation's CACs where they would be in a hole where there was not currently a CAC. That's where our conversation started.

And then we got into the other issues. How are we connecting with MDT members? How are we wrapping training and support around the MDT processes? How can we help Choctaw Nation with the development of their MDT? Do they want to shift from holding space within each of the existing MDTs to having their own MDT? It's all super-complicated.

Then Gina hired her MDT Coordinator. Her name is Kari Hurst. We included Kari at that point, and we included staff from other CACs in regular conversations so they could share how their MDTs were operating, and they talked about how they [the Choctaw Nation

CAC and the other CACs on Choctaw lands] can support each other in more robust ways. Are there any issues coming up? Any problems we might be able to solve together?

We met, if I recall, monthly at first, when things were getting kicked off, and then we switched to a quarterly connections call, and everything was born from those conversations. I feel so grateful that we didn't have anybody on those calls, anybody participating, who was scared to say what they needed to say. So we were really able to work through kinks and processes and protocols.

I was also so grateful that Gina connected with our state chapter as quickly as she did. She brought with her a knowledge of CAC models in general because she held my same job in the State of Alabama. She directed the state chapter there before moving back home to her nation. So she knew what CACs were. She knew what the state chapter could do to support what she was trying to do. We talked about training. What do we need to do? How do we need to connect our other CACs to you guys more intimately in Choctaw nation? How do we support the work that you've started now, building your own MDT? And then how do we connect that with everything else?

**Do you have any advice for other state chapter directors about working with Tribal nations?**

If I had any advice for any chapter director across the nation, it would be that every bit of it is relational. Every single bit of it.

I remember advice I got from Geri Wisner, who is a prosecutor with lots of experience and now the Attorney General for the Muscogee Creek Nation. Everybody just kept saying, you need to call Geri, you need to call Geri. So we had multiple calls. She just kept saying over and over that jurisdiction will work itself out:

“Jurisdiction is jurisdiction,” she would say. “It is what it is.” And she’s a prosecutor, so that really meant something. And I was like, “Oh, but isn’t it about all these other things?” and she would say no. “What we’re really talking about are our children, the children who are going to carry us forward.”

And if I had a difficult day, if I was like, “What in the world just happened with that conversation? That was weird,” I thought about those words from Geri. She was very grounding in that advice to just keep focused on the children. We’re here for kids. And these kids are all of our kids. And jurisdiction will work itself out.

I think that’s a different way of saying this is all relational. Our work isn’t about digging in and being like, “We have to do it this way.” Our work is about, “How can we be creative and open-hearted? And how can we be curious about how to do this work alongside one another rather than further siloing ourselves?”

**I wonder if you could talk about barriers. What would some of the barriers be if you were to work with another Native nation on getting an MDT started? What would you have to overcome to help them achieve their goals?**

Well, one barrier is that there are only two full-time staff at the state chapter. There are not enough minutes in the week to really dig in and support folks in the way that we really need to. So we’re working on that internally. How do we expand to meet the need?

Also, it’s a layering of the jurisdictions, and so we’re having conversations with folks who call to say, “My sovereign nation might want to be next [after Choctaw Nation] to create our own CAC.” We want to be thoughtful about how to do it. We want to honor, always, of course, when a sovereign nation says, “We want to

have our own children’s advocacy center.” But also, how can we at the same time bolster the services that already exist for the CACs that are already operating and accredited? How do we connect all the people in that community in that really specific way?

And so, if we ask people if they are already connected to a multidisciplinary team and the answer is, “I don’t know,” then we pull up our list and say, “Okay, it looks like yes, you’re signed on to this CAC’s protocols. Did you know that?” And if they didn’t know that, then let’s find the person who does know that, and we’ll have a conversation together. And then we branch out with conversations. Now we’re connecting within entities. And then we’re branching out to whoever else needs to be part of this conversation, and then branching out and out, because, again, when you look at a map of Oklahoma, it kind of gives you a headache to see just layer upon layer upon layer of jurisdictions. I don’t know that that’s a barrier so much as just something requiring time. You need time to educate everybody about all these things.

**Could you talk about anything that you have learned from working with Native nations that has been useful in your work more broadly?**

I would say I have learned from both Geri Wisner and Gina South. First, they allow me to ask the stupidest questions. If I have a thought, I don’t even have to think twice about asking either one of them what it is I’m wondering about. Is what I’m thinking accurate? Am I on the right path? Am I tracking with what you guys want to do? They always answer my calls. They always are willing to get into an in-depth conversation or just a quick conversation about anything.

Also, I think from both Geri and Gina, what I’ve learned is that I’ll have a hope for all of us, for

every part of the world, to carry forward the sentiment that this isn't about us. This isn't about power. This is about kids. And seven generations from today, what do we want our world to look like? We need to remember that we're here for kids. And these kids are all of our kids. How do we sustain this work for each generation? How do we support kids?

I believe that the critical heart of our work gets lost a lot of times, and power and control come into it, with questions like "Who's in control of the MDT?" or "Who's in control of the money? Who's in control of this land?" We forget that we're humans. And we're all connected. Outside of all this. That's the beauty of listening and being open and trying not to come into a room with all the answers already answered in your head. At the end of the day, if people are here because they want to retain power, or they want to be the loudest voice, that's just not going to work. It never has worked.



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Criminal Justice Management and Administration from the University of Central Oklahoma and has over 20 years of experience in the domestic violence and child maltreatment fields. Before working with CACO, Carrie served as Vice President of Administrative Affairs at The Parent Child Center of Tulsa. Before moving to Tulsa in 2009, Little served as the Executive Director of the CART House, the Children's Advocacy Center (CAC) serving Canadian County in El Reno, Oklahoma.

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