

Safe Harbor Child Advocacy Center of the Smokies

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Date: December 5, 2019



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Donna Koester, founding Executive Director of Safe Harbor Child Advocacy Center of the Smokies, has announced that she will retire by June 1, 2020 after almost 15 years at the organization's helm.

Koester leaves behind a fiscally sound, well-established agency which annually serves more than 370 children and adolescents within the 4th Judicial District, including Cocke, Grainger, Jefferson, and Sevier counties. The mission of Safe Harbor is "to serve children who are victims of severe neglect, physical or sexual abuse, or who have witnessed a violent crime or act through prevention, education, and intervention".

Koester states "It has been a privilege to work with amazing Board members, unselfish donors, forward-thinking local community leaders, and above all else a compassionate and dedicated professional staff, to establish and grow an organization that is so committed to protecting and healing maltreated children across our district."

As a former educator and long-time child advocate, Koester developed a keen awareness of the long-term effects on children who experience abuse or witness domestic abuse and violence. While serving on Sevier County's Foster Care Review Board in the early 2000s she learned about Child Advocacy Centers (CAC) which advocate and coordinate services for abused children across the country. She set about to address what she saw as a glaring need in our community,

and over the next few months, she recruited friends, law enforcement officials, social service agencies, local professionals, community leaders, and government officials throughout the 4th Judicial District to share her vision. The State of Tennessee was petitioned, and on September 1, 2005, Safe Harbor Child Advocacy Center of the Smokies was born. Today the agency coordinates the interagency efforts of all law enforcement agencies, Child Protective Services, medical and mental health professionals, and the Attorney General's office by providing specialized investigative, advocacy and therapeutic services to better serve children affected by abuse and trauma.

Reflecting on Koester's departure, Safe Harbor Board Chair, Jimmy Millsaps, commented, "It is an honor to serve on the Board of Directors of Safe Harbor Children's Advocacy Center and to witness both its growth and the high regard community leaders, child advocates, and donors have for its important work. Donna is the face of Safe Harbor, and her unwavering and selfless service to the children of these four counties cannot be measured."

Throughout her professional life, Koester has worked in the public as well as private sectors, beginning her career as an art teacher in inner-city Toledo, Ohio while co-owning a successful florist and art studio. Upon moving to Sevier County, Koester served as the interim guidance counselor at Gatlinburg Pittman High School in 1975 and then transferred to Sevier County High School where she established the art program. In 1977, she returned to the private sector, opening Koester & Associates, a freelance graphic design and advertising firm engaging both local and regional clients.

Koester's leadership skills have been evident throughout her career as she has served on boards of various non-profit, civic, and business organizations. After participating in Leadership Sevier's Class of 2005, she was chosen to direct the pilot program for Smoky Mountain Youth Leadership in 2004-2006. It was also during her Leadership Sevier experience that Koester, along with like-minded friends and associates, gained the determination and community support to establish Safe Harbor.

Koester noted, "I am proud to leave a strong organization that exists solely to make a positive difference in the lives of the children by believing them and treating them with patience, hope and healing. I will forever be thankful for all those who have supported Safe Harbor in bringing this vision to fruition and allowing me the opportunity to serve the children, and therefore the future of our community."

Millsaps added, "We have an opportunity now to build on Donna's good work and continue the growth and impact of Safe Harbor. Although Donna is irreplaceable, we look forward to new leadership to continue on the path she has so capably set."

He went on to say that the Safe Harbor Board of Directors has appointed a search committee to recruit a new Executive Director, and additional information about the position can be found at www.safeharborcac.com. Millsaps added that the community will be invited to a celebration later in the spring to honor Koester and to also mark the 15th Anniversary of Safe Harbor.