



MASSACHUSETTS CHILDREN'S ALLIANCE

**8th Annual Statewide Conference**

**Healing, Hope and Justice: An Advanced Conversation**

**Research Collaboration on the Prosecution of Child Sexual Abuse: Challenges and Outcomes**

*Presenters: Stephanie Block, Ph.D and Linda M. Williams, Ph.D*

There is a growing body of research examining the criminal prosecution of child sexual abuse (CSA). However, there are significant methodological and ethical challenges in the conduct of this research. One key component of success is assuring that the efforts involve close research-practitioner collaboration. This is critical to frame research questions, acquire access to confidential case records and trial evidence, understand the prosecutorial decision making and outcomes, and reliably code, analyze, and interpret the data so it is useful to the field. This session will address how we approached such obstacles and will discuss the findings of this collaborative research.

This research, funded by the National Institute of Justice, takes a child development and justice system approach to understand prosecution and the obstacles leading to high attrition rates in 500 CSA cases from four counties in one state. This case study design captures multiple models of prosecutorial response to CSA in real-world context, and we identify concerns with victim competency, credibility, cooperation, and evidentiary issues. We discuss the methodological and ethical challenges of this type of research. Findings suggest many barriers to prosecution and we review the current collaborative approach to making recommendations designed to change outcomes for children.

**Presenter Bio: Stephanie Block, Ph.D**



Stephanie Block, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor in Applied Developmental Psychology at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell. She teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in Child Maltreatment and Psychology and Law. She received her Ph.D. from the University of California, Davis, and was a NICHD postdoctoral fellow with the Center for Developmental Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. During her postdoc she was also affiliated with the Injury Prevention Research Center where she received public health training and conducted research in the primary prevention of child maltreatment. Dr. Block serves on the Executive Committee for the American Psychological Association's Division on Child and Family Policy's Section on Child Maltreatment. Her research has broadly focused on children in the legal system, the effects of trauma on children's wellbeing, and memory for emotional events. Dr. Block has consulted with several district attorney offices and the Innocence Project on issues related to children's eyewitness testimony and their experiences

in court. She has testified as an expert witness for the State about delayed disclosure and children's memory for trauma in child sex abuse cases.

**Presenter Bio: Linda M. Williams, Ph.D**



Linda M. Williams, Ph.D., is a senior research scientist and co-director of the Justice and Gender-Based Violence Research Initiative at the Wellesley Centers for Women. The focus of her current work is on justice system response to sexual violence, commercial sexual exploitation of women and children, human trafficking, intimate partner violence, and child maltreatment. Dr. Williams returned to WCW after serving as professor of Criminal Justice and Criminology at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell (2005-2015) and where she is now Professor Emerita. Author of many books and scholarly publications, Dr. Williams has lectured internationally on sexual violence, commercial sexual exploitation, trauma & memory, and researcher-practitioner collaborations. She served as an invited expert for the first international expert meeting on domestic sex trafficking under the auspices of the National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings and Sexual Violence against Children in The Hague, Netherlands and also on the National Research Council Panel on Violence Against Women.