

Executive Announces Upcoming Retirement

By William Meiners
Herald Staff Writer

Audra Stahl, president and CEO of Child Advocacy, is retiring from the organization where she has spent the last 16 years.

Named interim director in 2009, Stahl focused on collaborations to turn a fledgling agency into one of the premier nonprofits in Gratiot County.

Her end-of-June retirement will open the door for Jennifer Stambaugh, who has worked at Child Advocacy since 2010, to step into the role of CEO and president. STAHL Her own familiarity with the organization, along with her assistance in growing various programs, have Stambaugh ready to take the lead.

From colleagues to board members, the consensus seems to be that Stahl has personified Child Advocacy for a decade and a half. Her success is attributable to her "tenacity, grit, focus, and class," said Heather Therrien, program director of the Child Advocacy Center. "Every new initiative she launched for the agency always seemed to be accompanied by some sort of adversity. Time and time again, her team has witnessed her overcome what seemed like insurmountable challenges to ensure the agency remained at the forefront of service provision for children and families in Gratiot County."

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Jennifer Leppien, a board member, noted the evolution of the agency. "Child Advocacy has grown tremendously under Audra's leadership," she said. "She has taken Child Advocacy from a childcare referral service to an agency that is able to address and respond to any given need that a child or family in our community may have."

Joe Bowen, another board member, suggested Stahl's leadership was transformational. "She is one of those uniquely inspirational and dynamic leaders, with the ability to create a vision, gather the resources, and galvanize the people necessary to execute with excellence," he said.

Safety Lady to CEO

It all began for Stahl when she took a parttime position with Child Advocacy in 2007, teaching the "Protect Yourself" program in elementary schools. She had taken a few years off to be with her young children and volunteer for various school and community activities. The summertime move gave her a chance to "dip her toe back into the social work" she had pursued previously.

She was also excited about getting into the schools to spend some quality time with her own kids. "I quickly became known as the 'Safety Lady' among the elementary students in the county," Stahl said. "This was fun for me since I was volunteering with Alma Sports Boosters at the time and got to see many of my students while working concessions. I loved hearing them cry out, 'There's the Safety Lady.'"

Within a couple of years, the board asked Stahl to become the interim director. "I didn't really want to work full time or to have that level of responsibility, but there were really no other options as our staff was small," Stahl said. "When I became the interim director, we were moving into the Wilcox Center, going through an audit that I knew nothing about, and had very little resources to work with."

Short staffed and all, Stahl and a few colleagues overcame those challenges through hard work. To reshape an organization that had existed since the 1970s, they focused on the mission of improving the lives of children and their families in the community through the Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention program. "We started writing

grants, big and small, reaching out to donors, hosting fundraisers and events, and really just anything that would get our name out there and build brand recognition," Stahl said. "We were truly the little engine that could."

Over the next few years, the "little engine that could" also proved to be a force for community change. The Children's Advocacy Center, designed with National Children's Alliance accreditation standards, opened up doors for state and federal funding. Other programs, including those dedicated to minimizing substance abuse and preventing suicide, took shape.

"After opening the doors to the Children's Advocacy Center in 2013, we decided we could still do more," Stahl said. "The Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) program proved to be the perfect fit for our agency."

New staff members were added with each new initiative. In 2017, the Red Cross asked them to take over the county's Baby Pantry. Today, it's the only agency in Michigan with all of these programs under one roof. "We are a true parent resource center located right here in the heart of our state," Stahl said. "I am proud to say that we started with a \$100,000 budget and two-and-a-half employees in 2010. We now have just over a \$1 million operating budget with 16 employees."

Collaborative success

Alongside building all of those programs, Stahl may be most proud of the team she has helped build at Child Advocacy. "They are truly the dream team, and I am honored to work beside them every day," she said. "I have always shared the quote, 'Aspire to be the recognized expert,' and they are truly the experts in their fields, often recognized at the state level by their peers. I will miss this team more than anything once I am retired."

Simply working well with others may also be key to success — for any organization. "Audra strongly believes in collaboration and working together for the common good," said Michelle Zombeck, CASA program director. "She taught me that partnering with other like-minded individuals and organizations can make the vision come true."

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Leppien echoed that sentiment. "Gratiot County is a collaborative community and Audra is certainly a byproduct of that," she said. "She admires the collaboration and embraces opportunities to work with individuals and organizations in order to improve the lives of others."

At the start of her leadership tenure, collaboration not only made good business sense, but it may have been necessary for their survival. "We have never attempted to do anything on our own," Stahl said. "When a new idea or program is brought to my door the first question I always ask is, 'Who can we partner with?' We aren't afraid to put our name last on a project or in the smallest print as long as it means that whatever we are working on to improve the lives of others is being accomplished. We have been fortunate to benefit from partnering with so many local businesses and organizations it would be too hard to name them all."

The teamwork, of course, has led to successful programs for both the agency and the community. When pressed about the top three achievements at Child Advocacy under her watch, Stahl said, "the team we have built, the development of the Children's Advocacy Center, and construction of our new building."

Legacy and organizational outlook

Stahl, just 49 years old, has had a "long-standing goal of retiring at the age of 50." She will hit that mark in August. "My husband and I started our family very young and now that our kids are grown and on their own, we look forward to traveling and spending time together," she said.

Though that does not mean she's stepping away from leadership roles. "I still feel I have many gifts that I can share with the community, so I hope to continue volunteering and serving on boards," Stahl said. "I just recently wrapped a nine-year stint with the Community Foundation Board of Directors, I am in year seven on the Chamber Board, and I recently finished my four-year term as a city commissioner. As someone who was raised by this community, I have always felt that it's important to give back and I intend to continue to do that even in retirement."

Stahl also suspects the place she helped

revitalize will be in good hand with Stambaugh. "Jennifer started with the agency back in 2010 by serving on our Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Committee, which then led her to a seat on our board of directors. Eventually she was hired as our Victim and Family Advocate in the Children's Advocacy Center," Stahl said. "Jennifer has a master's in administration from Central Michigan University and over 25 years of experience throughout her career advocating for and serving children and families in many capacities. There is nobody that I trust more to take over the agency that I have loved so much these past 15 years than Jennifer."

Still, Stahl will be missed by colleagues and countless people within the community. "What I will miss most about Audra is her vision, creativity, and passion for the work that we do at Child Advocacy," Zombeck said. "Her ability to create relationships at all levels in our organization from volunteers to board members and those served by the Child Advocacy mission is inspiring. Audra has been a friend and mentor that I had the privilege of working with for almost a decade."

Although Stahl will have a chance for fond farewells on June 29, her last day, she wanted to express her gratitude to everyone who supported her throughout her journey. "My husband, children, family, and friends have been by my side cheering me on, wiping my tears, and attending every event these past 15 years," she said. "In the early days it was literally my family, immediate and extended, and closest friends that you would see working at every 5K race, donating to every fundraiser, and attending every event."

That "work family," both in-house and through myriad collaborations, also helped Child Advocacy reach greater goals. "I would also like to thank my co-workers, the board of directors, members of this community, and our collaborative partners who supported me as the CEO and offered encouragement, mentorship, guidance, and leadership throughout my time at Child Advocacy," she said. "What an incredible journey this has been working alongside all of you. I will sincerely miss all of you and Child Advocacy more than you could ever imagine."