

PALMETTO BAY

# New office helps kids

■ Like its downtown headquarters, Kristi House's south office provides free therapy for children who have been sexually abused.

BY BECKY FARBER  
Special to The Miami Herald

For child victims of sexual abuse living in South Miami-Dade, traveling to the downtown office of Kristi House for counseling used to be a daunting task.

Nearly a quarter of Kristi House clients live south of Kendall Drive. For some, transportation was an issue that caused them to miss appointments.

That hurdle was overcome last August with the opening of a south office at 15321 S. Dixie Hwy., in Palmetto Bay.

"It is central for the southern region of the county," said Etain Connor, development officer of the 11-year-old agency.

"It is on U.S. 1, not off on a side street, so it is easy to find. And it is right across the street from a bus stop. We look for accessibility."

Kristi House's south office operates 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. with a therapist on staff five days a week and a visiting therapist once a week.

A case coordinator works with law enforcement and social service agencies to minimize the need for a child to tell his or her story multiple times.

Upon walking in, the first thing a visitor sees is a mural-painted wall with three-dimensional butterflies attached to the wall and hanging from the ceiling. Decorative wall quilts — a Kristi House decoration staple — are found in each of the four rooms of the office.

Connor said it was important to maintain the same atmosphere of the main office so that the children and their

families still could feel comfortable in the new location.

"We needed to keep a consistent look of warm colors, lots of light and a feeling of comfort. It helps the family and child," she said.

The University of Miami Child Protection Team, which provides forensic medical exams for all child abuse victims, shares the space.

Full-time therapist Christina Sendina said that therapy is a vital component to a child's — and family's — recovery.

"Sexual abuse is a cycle, and [therapy] allows them to break that cycle, break that silence," said Sendina, a Kendall resident. "It empowers them."

The new site came together with grants and donations. One donor, Coconut Grove-based accounting firm Kaufman, Rossin & Co., renovated the office and held a toy drive.

With toys everywhere in sight and plenty of comfortable places to sit, Connor said that the right surroundings help with recovery.

"The main goal was to create a child-friendly, warm and loving environment," she said.

"We believe that helps a child recover when they're coming here for therapy."

The organization plans to open a north office close to the Broward County line. For now, "We're very happy to be accessible now to clients in the southern part of the county," Connor said.

## KRISTI HOUSE

• **FOR INFO:** Call 305-259-0016 for the Palmetto Bay office; 305-547-6800 for the downtown office. Visit [www.kristihouse.org](http://www.kristihouse.org)