NORRISTOWN — Often when a child accuses an adult of sexual abuse, battle lines are drawn. Family members take sides. And vulnerable children’s suffering is compounded.

In the late 1990s, a 9-year-old girl testified in a Montgomery County courtroom about how her mother’s boyfriend molested her while she took baths, former county prosecutor Wendy Demchick-Alloy recalled.

While the Towamencin girl was on the witness stand, her mother sat in the spectator seating behind her boyfriend — the man later convicted of abusing her daughter. After the girl finished testifying, she stepped off the stand and walked halfway across the courtroom and stopped. During a long pause she glanced around the room, looking over at her mother.

“She looks at the woman for 10 or 15 seconds,” Demchick-Alloy said. “That’s a long time in a courtroom.”

Eventually, the girl walked across the room, opened the gate and took a seat behind the prosecutors’ table. Her actions spoke volumes about family dysfunction.

“I knew (then) that the dynamic was clearly dangerous for this child,” she said.

The child’s dilemma made it clear to the then-assistant district attorney that abused children needed their own personal advocates to support them while they made their way through the legal system. Demchick-Alloy’s assistant DA colleague, Risa Vetri Ferman, agreed.

“You can imagine the upheaval and chaos that occurs when a child accuses a parent of abuse,” Demchick-Alloy said.

Eventually, she and Ferman proposed getting children suspected of being sexually or physically abused their own legal advocates. The program was modeled after the Support Center for Child Advocates that Demchick-Alloy was familiar with when she was an attorney in the Philadelphia DA’s Office.
Since 1977, the Philadelphia child advocacy center has offered free legal and social services to the city’s abused and neglected children.

At first, the idea of arranging to get lawyers for abused children was met with skepticism, Ferman said, but eventually the women created the Montgomery Child Advocacy Project (MCAP) running the fledgling effort in the early years from the DA’s Office.

The nonprofit organization, which began with only a handful of lawyers in 1997, now has 100 attorneys doing pro bono work on behalf of children.

Since 2004, Montgomery Child Advocacy Project has represented 1,331 children in 791 legal cases, according to Mary Pugh, the organization’s administrative director who runs the day-to-day operations at the Cherry Street office. She’s a former MCAP attorney.

She said reported incidents of abuse rose with a 2007 requirement mandating that anyone having daily contact with a child has an obligation to report abuse to authorities.

“Our numbers in December have really surged,” Pugh said. As well, on the Fourth of July weekend children are more at risk of being harmed.

While Pugh handles public relations, financing, marketing and outreach, Demchick-Alloy, the project director, follows up on requests from police and judges to line up lawyers to take cases and conducts training sessions at law firms and other organizations.

Kelly C. Wall, a solicitor for Office of Children and Youth, began providing legal representation for children for MCAP in 2004. At Children and Youth, she works to get foster children into permanent homes.

“We don’t want children to languish in foster care,” she said.

Wall, who practices law at Miller, Turetsky, Rule & McLennan in Collegeville, said being able to help children through MCAP has been especially rewarding. She said the children are grateful.

“You hate that it exists, but it helps so many kids in need,” she said. “I became their confidante, their champion and their advocate.”

Wall, who has practiced family law for many years, is a board member of NHS Human Services, in Lafayette Hill, which provides special needs for children and adults. She also serves on the Whitemarsh Board of Supervisors.

Demchick-Alloy is a member of the management team of Mission Kids Child Advocacy Center that was envisioned more than a decade ago as part of the MCAP concept to ease children through the justice system.
“It’s all part of a single plan,” Ferman said. “It’s all about protecting kids who were being abused in Montgomery County.”

Violence directed toward children does not discriminate and is a constant threat to their well being.

“It never stops, it doesn’t take a vacation, and it crosses all socioeconomic lines,” Demchick-Alloy said.

Both Demchick-Alloy and Wall are running for the county bench in November.

The advocacy center’s annual fundraiser Run For The Hill Of It is scheduled Saturday, July 25, along the Wissahickon Creek in Chestnut Hill. For more information, visit www.mcapkids.org.