

## Crisis Nurseries: Respite for Children at Risk of Abuse or Neglect

### Introduction

Crisis nurseries provide temporary respite for families experiencing challenging life circumstances that place their children at risk for abuse and/or neglect. Created to provide immediate stress relief for parents and caregivers in times of crisis, the care provided by most nurseries can be accessed any time of the day or night and is offered free-of charge.

Although the word “nursery” is typically used when referencing facilities for infants or very young children, crisis nurseries may serve children whose ages range from birth to eighteen years. Often, programs serve a particular age group (e.g., birth to three years or preschoolers, etc.). Some programs offer emergency care exclusively for children experiencing a disability and their siblings, although most do not have a disability-related eligibility requirement. A dependent child experiencing risk for maltreatment due to family crisis is often the only eligibility criteria. Other terms used for this type of emergency service are “crisis respite” or “emergency respite.”

Crisis nurseries were first developed in the early 1970’s as a support service to families needing a place of safety for their children during times of crisis. Nurseries are a practical alternative for families lacking appropriate, willing, or proximally

close friends and relatives who can provide child care in an emergency. In some instances, crisis nurseries are the only alternative for families who otherwise would have experienced a foster care placement, an unnecessarily intrusive option when a brief period of respite could alleviate the parental stressors that could lead to abuse or neglect.

### Crisis Nursery Program Models

There is no single crisis nursery model. Program models differ according to the needs of the families within the community. For example, some programs may elect to serve families in situational emergencies such as families involved in divorce or a long hospital stay; whereas, other programs focus on serving children and families where potential abuse or neglect has been identified by the parents themselves or another agency. Local or state regulations related to center or home-based child care will influence the model of crisis care.

Crisis nursery programs may provide both in-home or center-based care. Many nurseries use existing day care centers, private homes that have been licensed (similar to foster care homes), or emergency shelter facilities. Other programs are located in facilities which are specifically designated as a crisis nursery.

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A feature shared by most crisis nurseries is the accessibility of care anytime of the day or night, three-hundred and sixty-five days a year. Beyond that, nurseries are diverse in the services they deliver. Depending on community needs, regulatory limitations, and availability of resources, crisis nursery programs provide or connect families with support services such as:

- parent education
- developmental assessments for children
- parent support groups
- assistance with food, clothing, and transportation
- family and individual counseling
- service coordination (case management)
- access to medical and dental services
- employment training
- help lines
- substance abuse prevention and treatment
- ongoing planned respite

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Regulations related to the provision of crisis care vary from state to state. Most states have no formal rules specifically for crisis care; services are often licensed under existing child care, foster care, or residential care rules. The following descriptions are examples of crisis nursery program models.

### **Center-Based Crisis Nursery Facility**

Center-based crises nursery care may occur in a licensed child care facility specifically designated as a crisis nursery. This model usually provides services 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. State requirements for food preparation, staff-child ratio, health and safety, and other licensing requirements must be followed. This model may offer a variety of related programs such as substance abuse prevention programs and programs for special circumstances such as teenage mother assistance programs. This type of crisis nursery may be located within a larger organization such as a child welfare agency.

## **Providence House**

Providence House in Cleveland, Ohio, is an example of a center-based crisis nursery that provides emergency respite and comprehensive wrap-around services to vulnerable children and families.

Providence House maintains 30 beds to serve 350 children and 150 families with center-based crisis care. Services for children include: emergency shelter, direct care services, and medical care and monitoring. Services for parents include: case management/aftercare; parent support and education; family trauma services; family medical skills training.

Providence House also offers an after-care program of in-person case management for 6-12 months following a crisis, and a trauma informed group led by a social worker and peers as part of a discharge plan. [provhouse.org](http://provhouse.org)

In 2019, Providence House was selected as an Innovative and Exemplary respite service by the ARCH National Respite Network and Resource Center.



### **Center-Based Day Care Facility**

Some family support programs contract with existing day care centers to offer immediate care for children in emergency situations. This cost-effective model uses day care centers which already meet state licensing requirements and have trained staff who provide developmentally appropriate activities for the children. Day care staff may receive additional training on topics such as working with children at risk of abuse and neglect. Additional family support services may be provided as needed. This model may not be able to offer child care services 24 hours a day because of licensing requirements and the hours of operation of the day care facility.

### **Community-Center Model – Multiple Sites**

This type of crisis nursery model, frequently used in rural areas, provides temporary child care by utilizing a variety of existing community facilities (community centers, churches, etc.) in one or more geographical locations. These facilities are provided through informal or formal agreements. This model may not be able to offer temporary child care services 24 hours a day because of limited use of the community facility. Often, family support services such as parent support groups or parenting classes are offered for part of the time during which the child is receiving care. Trained volunteer families within the community can be the providers in this model. This model very effectively fosters interagency collaboration and coordination.

### **Family Care Home Model**

In this model, family care homes with foster care licensing provide care for children. Crisis nursery child care is usually provided up to seventy-two hours for each stay. As a decentralized model, it is effective for rural settings. All providers are screened, licensed and trained. They receive a stipend to help offset expenses for food and necessary supplies. Some providers serve programs as volunteers, while others are paid. Besides family care home providers, the agency uses staff in the

community to help with transportation, intake, and other duties integral to the operation of the program.

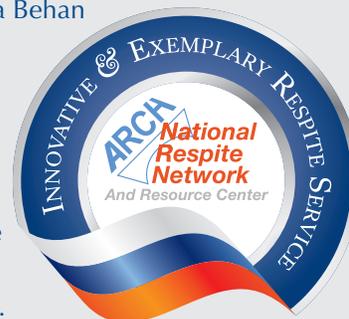
### **In-Home Crisis Care Models**

In-home crisis nursery programs provide some or all crisis nursery services within the family's home. Caring for the child within his or her home helps provide child care relief with minimal disruption of routine activities. Other in-home models provide temporary child care outside the home and parent support services within the home. These home-based services may include support counseling, activities to enhance parenting skills, or provide

#### **Vanessa Behan**

Vanessa Behan Crisis Nursery in Spokane, Washington, supports parents and primary caregivers to reduce the potential for abuse or neglect. Staff providing care capitalize on opportunities to promote healthy brain development, build resiliency and provide children with an experience of safety, love and wonder. Services are voluntary, free of charge and available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year so that whenever a parent is faced with challenging circumstances or a lack of a safe care alternative, they have a place to turn. Annually, Vanessa Behan serves an average 550 children from birth through age six. The center is funded entirely through private donations and foundation or corporate grants. [vanessabehan.org](http://vanessabehan.org)

In 2019, Vanessa Behan was selected as an Innovative and Exemplary respite service by the ARCH National Respite Network and Resource Center.



additional information according to individual family needs and assistance in accessing identified resources.

## Accessing Crisis Care

For the vast majority of crisis nurseries, family participation is voluntary and parents maintain legal custody of their children while the children receive service. A small minority of nurseries reserve beds for children in the state's custody when foster or shelter care resources are not available. This is the exception, not the rule.

Once nurseries are established in a community, a large portion of families using the service are self-referred and find the nursery through word of mouth. Other referrals to crisis nurseries come through Child Protective Services as an alternative or differential response to foster care. Successful crisis nurseries develop strong relationships with community partners and receive referrals and other supports from community social service agencies, medical and legal systems, and the faith community.

## Crisis Nursery Funding

Funding for crisis nurseries varies across states and programs. Very often, nurseries' primary sources of revenue are foundation grants and donations from individuals and the business community. Tobacco tax funding has been used to support nurseries in a handful of states. Although some nurseries have reported keeping their doors open without accepting public funding, a handful of state and federal sources have been used to support crisis nurseries.

Recognizing the potential of crisis nurseries to prevent put-of-home placements and reduce potential for child maltreatment, some states have committed state general funds to support nurseries. Other potential federal funding sources for crisis nurseries include the Social Services Block Grant Program (Title XX of TANF), and Promoting Safe and Stable Families (Title IV-B of the Social Security Act).

## State Supported Networks of Crisis Nurseries

**Utah:** In partnership with the community, the Division of Child and Family Services, Utah Department of Human Services, supports child abuse and neglect prevention services for families and the community. In addition to parenting classes, evidence-based home visitation programs, statewide community and school-based education presentations, and support to Grandparents raising grandchildren, 14 crisis nurseries in local Family Support Centers are supported across the state. Crisis nurseries provide up to 72-hours of free care to children under the age of 12 as well as planned respite. [dcfs.utah.gov/services/prevention](http://dcfs.utah.gov/services/prevention)

**Illinois:** A similar network of six crisis nurseries are funded by Donated Funds Initiative (DFI) through Family and Community Services, Illinois Department of Human Services. [www.dhs.state.il.us/page.aspx?item=55909](http://www.dhs.state.il.us/page.aspx?item=55909)

Another federal funding source is the Community-Based Child-Abuse Prevention Program (CBCAP). CBCAP is Title II of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) and its funding can be used to support respite, including crisis nursery services. To learn if your state's CBCAP program is funding planned or crisis respite in your state, contact your state's CBCAP lead agency. [friendsnrc.org/contacts-and-assignments/state-contacts](http://friendsnrc.org/contacts-and-assignments/state-contacts)

## Effectiveness of Crisis Nurseries

Crisis nurseries offer emergency respite for children at risk of abuse or neglect. As with other types of respite services, crisis nurseries are designed to reduce caregiver stress, prevent out-of-home placements, reduce the risk for abuse and neglect, preserve the family unit, and support family

stability. Although only a handful of studies on crisis nursery outcomes have been published, they suggest that crisis care reduces caregiver stress, lowers the risk of abuse and neglect, and enhances parenting skills (Cole & Record, 2010).

Cole and Hernandez (2011) found that children who had experienced crisis care prior to a foster care placement were more than twice as likely to be returned to their biological parents than a comparison group whose families did not receive crisis nursery services. A study of families receiving crisis nursery services at Ohio's Providence House found that families who received crisis care services are less likely to later experience out-of-home placements (Crampton & Yoon, 2016). In a study conducted by ARCH (2006), it was found that although families who received crisis care were more likely than families in a comparison group to be reported to child protective services, families who received crisis nursery services were less likely to have the reports substantiated.

Crisis nurseries offer places of safety for children during times of family crisis. The services are free of charge, voluntary, and often prevent unnecessary foster care placements. Most programs offer additional family supports such as medical and dental health screenings and treatment, parent education and support, and substance use prevention. More research is needed to better understand the role crisis nurseries play in the lives of children and families.

## Summary

Crisis nurseries are a type of respite for children at risk of abuse and/or neglect. Crisis nursery services can occur in out-of-home or in-home settings for various lengths of time depending on the needs of the family and available resources. As with other types of respite services, crisis nurseries may help prevent out-of-home placements and possible abuse and neglect situations, preserve the family unit, and support family stability.

## Resources

**ARCH List of Crisis Nurseries** is a list that is provided by ARCH for informational purposes only and is not all-inclusive. The fact that a program is or is not listed here does not represent an endorsement or lack of endorsement for any purpose. See [archrespite.org/images/Crisis\\_Nurseries\\_Contact\\_List.pdf](http://archrespite.org/images/Crisis_Nurseries_Contact_List.pdf)

**Child Welfare Information Gateway** is a service of the Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. See *Respite Services for Families at Risk of Child Abuse and Neglect or Family Disruption* at [childwelfare.gov/topics/preventing/prevention-programs/respite/services](http://childwelfare.gov/topics/preventing/prevention-programs/respite/services)

**FRIENDS National Resource Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP)** is a service of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. [friendsnrc.org/activities-that-support-prevention/respite](http://friendsnrc.org/activities-that-support-prevention/respite)

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