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Cutler Bay mental health center expands services

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Brightly colored jungle animals decorate the walls of the play therapy room at Kids Hope United's offices in Cutler Bay. There's a kid-sized table and chairs, stuffed animals and bookshelves stocked with toys and games.

But look more closely and there are also ceiling cameras and a door with a one-way mirror to an observation room. Therapists sit in the room, watching and taping how kids and their families interact.

"If we observe, it's not so intrusive," said Marlin Livingston, the organization's executive director. "The dynamic is much different."

Kids Hope United, a nonprofit organization that offers services for children and families, opened the playroom in May 2006 for child-welfare system cases.

In October, the organization was given the green light from Medicaid to expand its services beyond the child-welfare system.

On Wednesday, Kids Hope United unveiled its Community Mental Health Center, an effort to offer its services -- such as psychiatric evaluations for children, individual and family therapy, and parenting classes -- to all of South Miami-Dade.

"We try very hard to make it family friendly," said Bettina Lozzi-Toscano, director of the mental health center. "We're booked up here all the time."

The center, at 10720 Caribbean Blvd., Suite 330, will see patients referred by case managers, schools and the court system, as well as self-referrals. It also accepts Medicaid and most insurance plans.

It's a much-needed service in the community, said Miami-Dade County Commissioner Katy Sorenson, who was at a breakfast and ribbon-cutting ceremony Wednesday.

"It's very difficult work," said Sorenson, a former social worker. "It's very emotionally wrenching."

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