The Council for the Advancement of Nursing Science (CANS)/American Nurses Foundation (ANF) has funded the Canine Companionship during Forensic Interviews project. Dr. Cheryl Krause-Parello, Director of the Center for Nursing Research, School of Nursing at Kean University, will serve as the project director. The purpose of this experimental study is to investigate the psychobiological interface between animal-assisted therapy (AAT) and stress indicators salivary cortisol, immunoglobulin A (IgA), blood pressure, and pulse, in child survivors of sexual abuse during forensic interviews at a Child Advocacy Center.

The project describes an innovative and cost-contained initiative to support child survivors of sexual abuse. The central hypothesis is that AAT can lead to stress indicator reduction in sexually abused children, as measured by in vitro measure salivary cortisol and IgA, and in vivo measures blood pressure and pulse. This hypothesis will be tested by measuring these in vitro and in vivo measures in sexually abused children before and after forensic interviews with or without a certified therapy canine present. Salivary cortisol levels and IgA will be measured by using a commercially-available, unstimulated saliva collection device, and will then be subjected to enzyme immunoassay (EIA) analysis. A biostatistician will assist in data analysis and interpretation to evaluate the research question.

Despite the high risk of traumatic stress in child survivors of sexual abuse, there have been no interdisciplinary studies to investigate the therapeutic effects of AAT on stress indicators in child survivors of sexual abuse during forensic interviews. With such high rates of child sexual abuse, there are a growing number of recovering abuse survivors that require interventions to promote the healing process and prevent future negative repercussions from the trauma of abuse.

This study is innovative in its examination of a nontraditional intervention that could be applied to multiple populations for various reasons. The project describes a new pathway to better well-being for the most vulnerable populations, with the potential to provide empirical knowledge in a controversial area with little experimental data. Therefore, this study will make a significant contribution to the field of nursing, and has implications for health and public policy. Continuing advances in our quest for pathways by which supportive resources affect mental health are essential to designing interventions that will ultimately reduce stress indicators and promote well-being in this population base.