The Honor Society of Nursing, Sigma Theta Tau International, has funded the project entitled “Examining Stress Indicators in Sexually Abused Children: Canine Companion during Forensic Interviews”. Dr. Cheryl Krause-Parello, Associate Professor in the School of Nursing at Kean University and director of the Kean Center for Nursing Research, will serve as the Principal Investigator. The purpose of this experimental study is to examine the psychobiological and behavioral interface between animal-assisted intervention (AAI) and stress indicators during forensic interviews at a Child Advocacy Center (CAC) in female children 6-12 years old alleged to have experienced sexual abuse.

The goal is to use AAI during the forensic interview of children alleged to have experienced child sexual abuse (CSA) to decrease stress indicators, as associated with traumatic stress, and provide an environment that is less intimidating for children alleged to have been abused to disclose intimate details of the sexual abuse. The effects of AAI on stress indicators will be measured by in vitro biomarkers, salivary cortisol and salivary alpha-amylase, along with in vivo biomarkers, blood pressure and pulse, before and after the forensic interview. Salivary cortisol levels and alpha-amylase will be measured by using a commercially-available, unstimulated saliva collection device, and will then be subjected to enzyme immunoassay analysis. For the analyses in this research, the level of significance will be $p \leq .05$. This study aims to effectively incorporate AAI and integrate a certified assistance canine into forensic interviews at a CAC that serve survivors of CSA. The long term aims of this program of research are to positively transform CACs nationwide by utilizing evidence-based practice protocols to reduce stress responses in children alleged to have experienced CSA.

The anticipated value and impact of this study in the field of stress research includes the development of an innovative behavioral intervention that improves knowledge on biomarkers associated with stress indicators in a vulnerable population. This study has promise to affect the current state of nursing science and has potential implications for healthcare practice protocols in child advocacy centers (CACs). Based on current statistics and preliminary support of the benefits of animal-assisted intervention, this study may identify an intervention that reduces the impact of trauma on a child’s biology, possibly interrupting the impact of abuse on children’s immediate and long-term negative health outcomes. In addition, a study of this kind has potential to generate evidence on the benefits of using AAI as a therapeutic intervention; thereby providing nurses and other health care providers with the empirical support needed to implement alternate stress reduction modalities in practice.