



Children's
Advocacy Project



helping
hands
2025 Annual Report







The Children's Advocacy Project is a team of committed agencies and individuals who work together to provide coordinated forensic and comprehensive services for alleged victims of child abuse and neglect in order to minimize trauma to children, break the cycle of abuse, and foster a more effective and efficient community response to child maltreatment.



a letter from our **Executive Director**

“Helping Hands”...what does that mean to you? To me, those words carry many meanings, shaped by our personal experiences, upbringing, education, and careers.

When I reflect on 2025, I see countless examples of helping hands in action through our team at CAP and our dedicated investigative partners. I think of the victim advocates who welcomed families with warmth and provided steady guidance during overwhelming moments. I think of the forensic interviewers who listened with care and patience as hundreds of children bravely shared their experiences of abuse. I think of the therapists who helped children process their trauma and begin the long, courageous journey toward healing. And I think of the investigators and prosecutors who perused justice with focus and determination.

No matter their role, our staff and MDT members demonstrated compassion, commitment, and integrity – offering helping hands to guide children and families through some of the most traumatic experiences imaginable.

I want to extend my sincere gratitude to the Board of Directors for ensuring the resources necessary to sustain our mission, to our CAP team for your untiring dedication, and the MDT teams who came together to support 286 children last year. Your helping hands truly make a difference. Thank you!

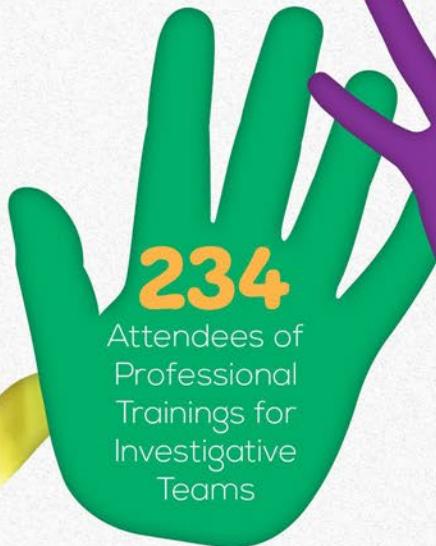


Stacy M. Nelson, Executive Director

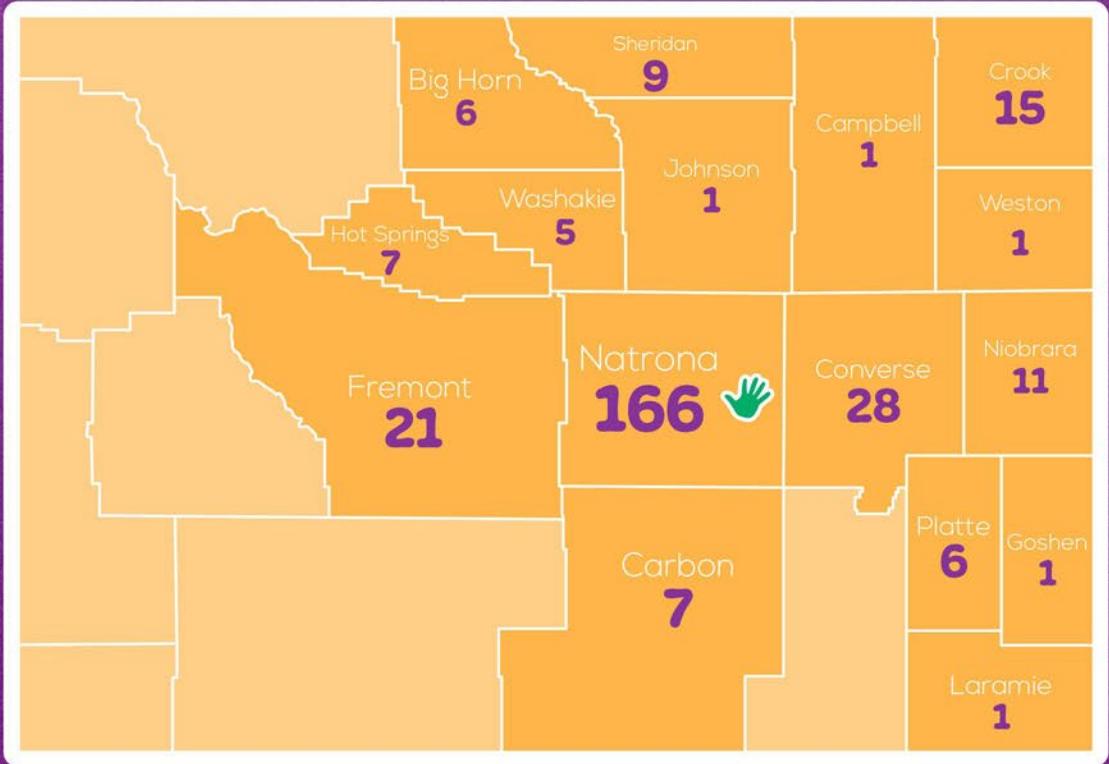


2025.

By the Numbers



Forensic Interviews by county



Other Courtesy Interviews: Arkansas, California, Colorado, Kentucky, Montana, Utah, and Washington





From the **286** Forensic Interviews conducted in 2025

Gender of Victims

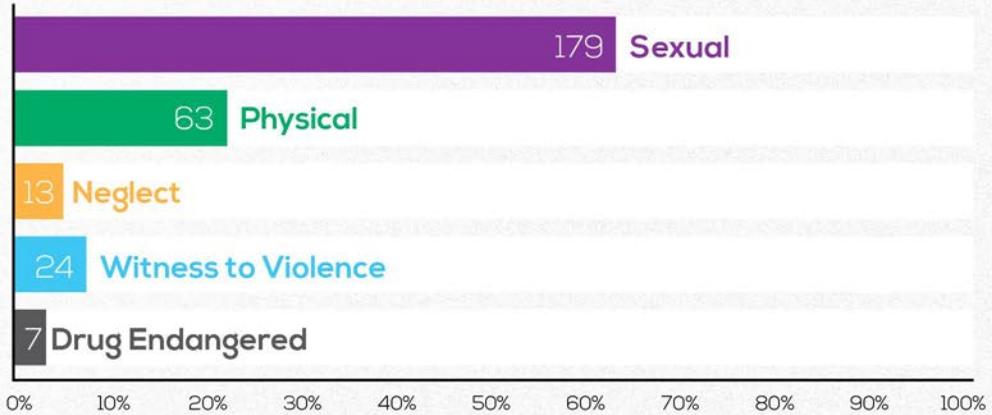


Age of Victims

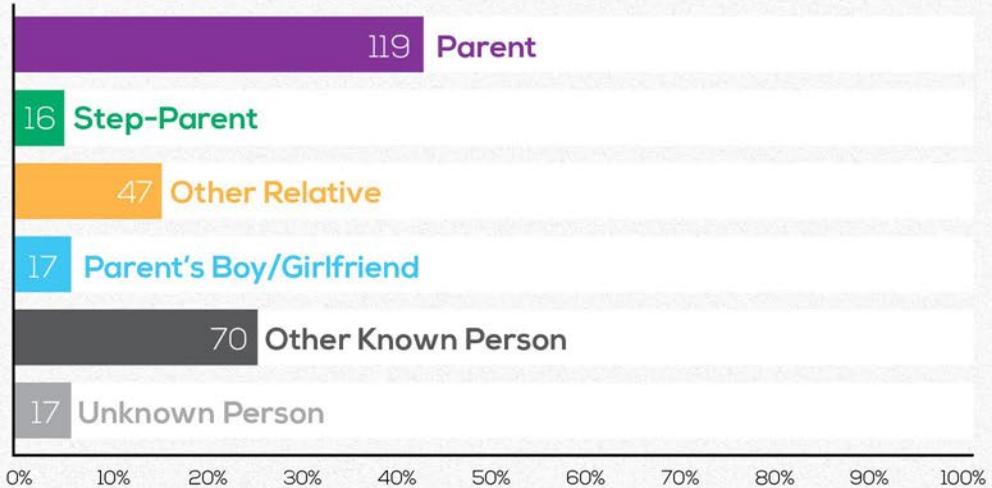


Type of Abuse

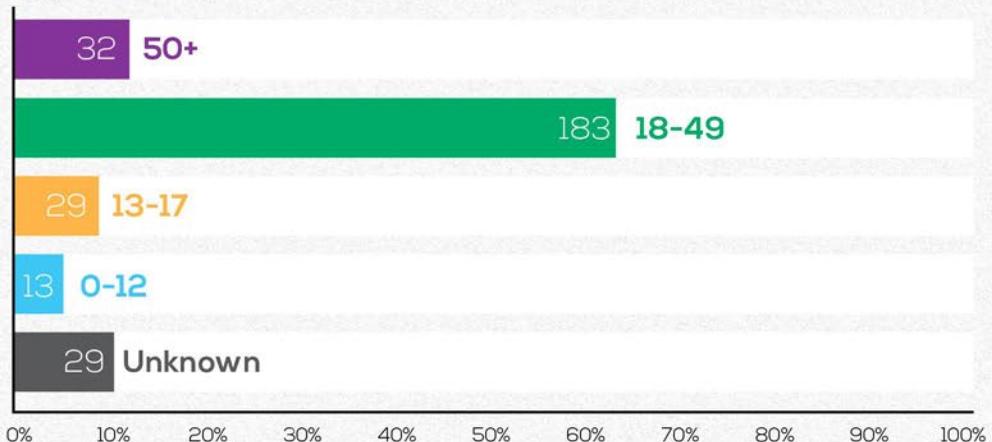
Of the 268 interviews, 80 children were victims of multiple types of abuse



Relation of Suspect



Age of Suspect



Working Hand in Hand

reflections from our multidisciplinary team

“The Children’s Advocacy Project demonstrates the power of true collaboration. By working closely with law enforcement, prosecutors, and the courts, this team ensures that children feel safe, heard, and supported during some of the most difficult moments of their lives. Their compassionate, coordinated approach protects children, strengthens cases, and reduces trauma for families, making a lasting difference in our community.”

Chief Thompson

“When agencies stand together with one purpose—to protect and uplift children—justice becomes stronger, healing becomes possible, and no child stands alone.”

Chief Bryant, *Moorcroft PD*

DaNece Day, *Crook County & Prosecuting Attorney*

“The Child Advocacy Project (CAP) is extremely helpful as the victim child will only have to tell their very traumatic story once, in a non-threatening environment. Also, the forensic interviewers are trained to not ask leading questions, which is advantageous for successful prosecution.”

Detective Justin Lindberg

“The Child Advocacy Project is a critical piece of the multidisciplinary team that brings child protection, law enforcement, and prosecutors together to collaborate and achieve the ultimate goal of keeping children safe in our community. CAP offers continued support for victims and families to heal from heinous events, strengthening survivor’s futures.”

Madison Brost, *BS, Social Services*

Investigator, Department of Family Services



“ The Children's Advocacy Project is a direct reflection of the Department of Family Services' mission: WY Home Matters. The DFS mission emphasizes three core values: safe at home, giving families opportunities for success, and supporting the people who support the families. CAP, very successfully, utilizes the MDT approach between mental health providers, DFS, law enforcement, forensic interviewers, the DA's office, etc., to support children in Natrona County and the greater Wyoming community. Being a part of the MDT collaboration through CAP is a truly empowering experience, and it helps each member of the team support everyone's main goal of keeping children safe.”

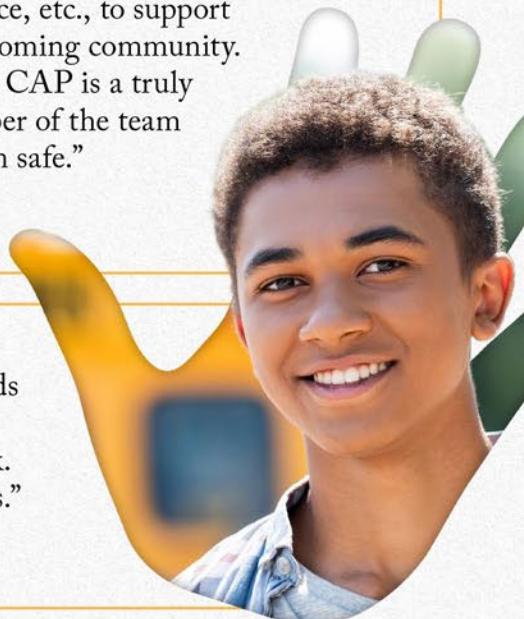
Landree Adams, *BSW*

“ CAP brings together different people from law enforcement to bankers. All of these backgrounds act with one voice and one purpose. That is to help children with issues that are extremely dark. The CAP center helps children lead normal lives.”

Dan Itzen, *District Attorney*

“ The Children's Advocacy Project is a vital program to the health and safety of Wyoming as a whole. As a prosecutor in a small rural jurisdiction with a lack of investigative resources, CAP allows us to professionally bring offenders against Wyoming's most vulnerable to justice. CAP not only provides professional forensic interviews that are in keeping with the latest research, they provide a safe place for children to share memories of traumatic experiences often forced upon them by people they dearly love. CAP's forensic interviewers are vital members of the Multi-disciplinary team. When investigator, Department of Family Services, victim witness, prosecutors, and CAP come together to attend a forensic interview to focus on the safety of a child powerful things happen; children are supported, investigations are complete and justice is served. Without CAP, children would not be properly interviewed, causing more trauma, and less positive outcomes for children. And then the Symposium not only does CAP offer their direct services, forensic interview, provide us space and join us to brainstorm about investigative avenues, they make sure to support the whole state by bringing phenomenal training to the State that is otherwise unavailable.

Kelly Owen, *Deputy Hot Spring County & Prosecuting Attorney*



Dakota's Story

“I didn’t know where to turn,” Dakota’s mom told the investigator. “So, I shared my concerns with my priest. He listened carefully and without interrupting. When I was done, he told me he was glad I’d come to him and that he would support me. The priest told me we were both mandated reporters and sat with me to make the call to Department of Family Services.”

That morning, 6-year-old Dakota told his mom that her husband, Dakota’s stepdad, had been coming into Dakota’s room at night. “Most nights, he comes in after I’m asleep, gets under the covers, and we cuddle. Like me and dad used to before the divorce.” Dakota was growing increasingly uncomfortable with his stepdad’s behavior and finally worked up the courage to tell his mom.

Recently, after quietly getting into bed with Dakota, his stepdad would pull out his phone. Drawing Dakota to him and putting his arm around Dakota, they would watch his phone together. This quickly became “their secret” because Dakota isn’t allowed to have his phone in his room at night. “We took turns picking what to watch. I’d pick anime or cartoons, and stepdad would pick sports or dumb “girl” movies about people falling in love and stuff.” It felt good to have a secret. Dakota missed his dad, who lives in another state. “Having something for just the two of us made me think we were close.”

One night, his stepdad pulled up a new cartoon that Dakota had never seen. “It was weird. No one had any clothes on, and it wasn’t funny. They just did ... well, stuff.” Dakota asked to watch something else, but his stepdad insisted they finish watching the naked cartoon. After it was over, Dakota turned away from his stepdad and tried to go to sleep. “My stepdad was moving around and breathing loud. I stayed really still and pretended like I was asleep.” Eventually, his stepdad got up and left.

This became the routine: after watching a naked cartoon or show he would roll over and pretend to sleep while his stepdad “moved around a little and breathed loud.” Dakota’s sleep became disrupted. He stayed awake, worrying his mom would find out and he would get in trouble for having a phone after bedtime. He had dreams that his mom came into his room and found him watching “inappropriate things.”

Many perpetrators of sexual abuse begin grooming, or manipulating, a child by introducing seemingly innocent behaviors, like spooning at bedtime. Asking the child to keep a secret enlists the child’s silence and implies it’s not safe to tell. Over time, perpetrators increase the level of inappropriate behavior that may include pornography and sexual touching. The child may have concerns, but his or her sense of danger is often eroded by the gradual increase of inappropriate

behavior and the position of authority or trust the perpetrator holds.

In Dakota's case, the pressure of not telling became too great. He told Marky, his best friend at school. "Marky said I was going to get in big trouble if my mom found out, so I had better tell her. He said he always got in more trouble if his mom found out first. So, I waited until my stepdad left for work and I told her. Mom wasn't as mad as I thought she was going to be. She told me my stepdad shouldn't have been showing me those things and, if anyone was in trouble, it was him. Then she hugged me and took me to school."

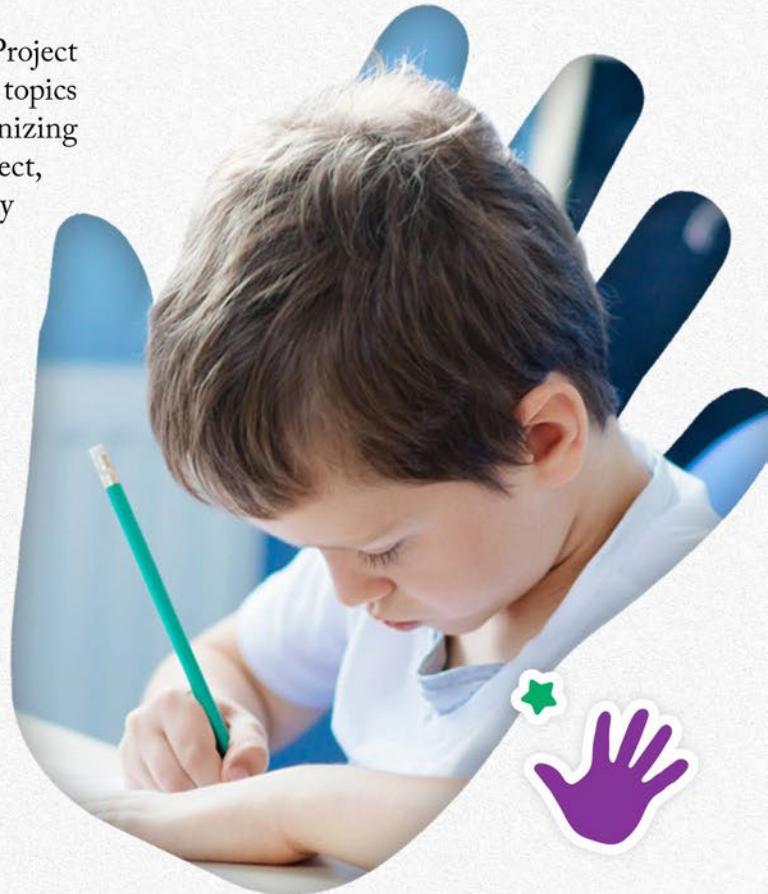
While Dakota is the hero of his story, the priest played a supporting role by being available to Dakota's mom and knowing how to respond to her concerns.

The Children's Advocacy Project provides training on a variety of topics related to body safety, and recognizing and reporting child abuse and neglect, and are age and developmentally appropriate. These trainings are conducted for community and private organizations, churches, and daycares.

In the state of Wyoming, all adults are mandated to report any reasonable suspicion of abuse to law enforcement and/or Department of Family Services. After receiving the report, an investigator contacted Dakota's mom and conducted a precursory interview, determining that a forensic interview should be scheduled that same day. "Mom

picked me up from school and we went to talk to some people. I told them about the shows. I was worried I was going to get in trouble, but they were really nice. It felt good to tell somebody. When it was done, we went to stay with my Nana. That's where we've been living."

Dakota's mom says she is breathing easier knowing she doesn't have to do this alone. "Making that first call with my priest made it easier to take the next steps. I called Dakota's grandmother and asked if we could stay with her for a while. Then I called my best friend, who told me she would be by my side through this. An investigation was opened, and both Dakota and I are in counseling. My husband and I are divorcing."





Year in Review

February

Casper man, Christopher Schmidt, sentenced to at least 60 and a 1/2 years relating to two sets of charges of second-degree sexual abuse and possession of Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM). Charges stemmed from an anonymous tip to DCI which led to the discovery of CSAM on Schmidt's account. Conversations about additional abuse to the less than one year old victim were also then discovered.

July

Brendan Sturman, of Casper, sentenced to 9 to 12 years in prison for a single count of second-degree sexual abuse. Additional charges were dropped as part of the plea agreement. Sturman, then 26, enticed a 14-year-old girl into a sexual relationship with him. Charges resulted after a disclosure from the victim to a woman close to Sturman.

August

Steven Marler, of Casper, sentenced to the equivalent of a life sentence; at least 128 years. Ten former foster or adoptive children testified at trial. His charges include eight felony counts in relation to sexual abuse over the course of a decade of two girls under his foster or adoptive care, five battery counts, and one count of child endangerment involving six other children. Marler fostered about seventy-five children since 2008 and formally adopted around twelve.

August

Oregon man, Gregory Westfall, sentenced to a total of 50 years for five counts of sexual abuse in the first degree and two counts of sodomy in the first degree. In Oregon, sodomy convictions are subject to Jessica's Law which requires a 25-year mandatory minimum sentence for adults convicted towards a child under the age of 12. Westfall's charges resulted when the victim reported her abuse over a 5-year period by Westfall to a family member at age 17.

October

Evan Kirkendall, 19, of Casper, pleads cold to one charge of aggravated assault and battery and faces up to 10 years in prison. Kirkendall stabbed the 17-year-old victim multiple times in the torso causing significant internal damage. Witnesses stated the altercation began as a spat over a disagreement regarding someone's girlfriend.

November

Former Washakie deputy, Myron Chatwin, convicted of first-degree sexual abuse of a child and two counts of second-degree sexual abuse. As a result, he now faces up to 190 years in prison. Investigation began when one victim disclosed sexual contact to a counselor and then other victims came forward with similar experiences.

November

Mills man, Christopher Debyah, sentenced to 3 to 4 years for third-degree sexual abuse of a minor after entering an Alford guilty plea to the charge. The female victim, age 11 or 12 at the time, would have testified that Debyah, who was 20 at the time, had inappropriately touched her and conducted other sexual acts to himself in front of her.

November

Colorado man, Jerry Bell, convicted of two counts of Sexual Assault on a Child in a Position of Trust as a Pattern of Abuse. Charges stemmed from a disclosure by the victim to her counselor. The victim, then 17, disclosed abuse when she was 12 or 13 by Bell. The suspect was in a relationship with the victim's sister, and the abuse would happen while she was visiting her sister.

December

Austin Workman, of Casper, to serve nine to twelve years in prison after pleading guilty to one count of second-degree sexual abuse. Concerns began when the victim, who was 8 at the time, disclosed the sexual assault to her counselor. When interviewed, the victim disclosed inappropriate touching on multiple occasions with Workman. During the investigation, Workman alleged the victim was the one who initiated the incident.

December

Casper man, Justin Wentz, sentenced to 5 to 6 years in prison for a charge of immodest, immoral, or indecent liberties with a minor. Investigation revealed Wentz supplied a 16-year-old female co-worker with alcohol at her request. Inappropriate touching was reported by the victim and review of the victim's phone indicated that there was a physical relationship between the two.



Annual Budget

FUNDING SOURCES

VOCA Federal Funding	\$49,500.00
State of Wyoming	\$90,500.00
Natrona Collective Health Trust	\$70,000.00
Natrona County	\$50,000.00
City of Casper	\$32,000.00
Town of Evansville	\$3,000.00
Town of Mills	\$6,500.00
Other City/County	\$35,137.00
Program Income	\$30,000.00
Wyoming Community Foundation	\$30,000.00
McMurry Foundation	\$30,000.00
United Way of Natrona County	\$25,000.00
Donations	\$10,000.00
Fundraising	\$53,000.00
Other Grant/Foundation Funds	\$11,000.00

\$523,637.50

EXPENSES

Salaries & Benefits	73%
Contract Services	5%
Training & Travel	4.5%
Building (Utilities, Phone, Internet, Insurance, General Maintenance, Housekeeping)	4.5%
Fundraising	3%
Accounting / Legal Services	3%
Equipment and Equipment Maintenance	2%
Advertising, Website, Community Education	2%
Supplies/Printing/Postage	2%
Meetings, Memberships, Dues	1%

100%



Thank You!



Thank you for being one of the many hands helping make a lasting impact.

Together, our hands are creating real change for children in our community!

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Alcova Resort
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Josh Wilson
Anastasia Sarbach
ANB Bank
API
Artisan Alley
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Lifetime Health &
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Liquor Shed
Lisa Carter
Lisa Lauderdale
Living Harmony
Massage Therapy
Lori & Ronnie Kline
Lorrie Anderson
Luke Studer
Luminous Skin Care

by Brittany
 McMurry Foundation
 Megan Coon
 Megan Spence State Farm
 Mesa Natural Gas Solutions
 Metro Coffee Company
 Michael Houck Real Estate Team
 Mirna Bustillos
 Modern Electric
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 Mrs. Natrona County America 2025 & Friends
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 Natrona County DFS
 Natrona County Parks & Rec
 Nowoodstock
 NStyle Nails and Spa
 Olive Garden
 One Eyed Buffalo
 P6 Station
 Paradise Valley Country Club
 Pepsi Bottling Company

Perkins Restaurant & Bakery
 Poplar Wine & Spirits
 Porter's Supply Co
 Racca's Pizzeria Napoletana
 Ragnar Defense
 Rialto Soda Fountain
 Rib & Chop House Casper
 Ridley's Outfitter Liquor
 Rocky Mountain Car Wash
 Rocky Mountain Discount Sports
 Rosemary Bartle & Tara Fairbanks
 Ryan Stepp
 Sandra Porter
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 Shannon Moore-University of Wyoming Football
 Sloanes General Store
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 Stephanie Brennan
 Sutherlands
 Tamela Keeran
 Taylor's Sports Bar

The Babe Cave
 Thomas & Sharie Davis
 Three Crowns Golf Club
 Toy Town
 Trout On Inn
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