

A Voice for the Vulnerable: A CASA Volunteer

When a child is placed in foster care after being abused and neglected and is asked to testify in the courtroom, who speaks up in their best interests? Who is in tune to their needs and well-being, and makes sure that their voice is heard? Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) fill this role. These trained citizen volunteers advocate for children as they navigate through the court process. They collect and provide critical information to the courtroom, with the ultimate goal of ensuring the child has a permanent, safe and loving home.

The benefits of children having someone who is dedicated to their best interests, and theirs only, is remarkable. This is shown through data cited by the National CASA Association for Children. Founded in 1977, this organization supports over 950 community-based programs throughout the nation. Children who have experienced abuse or neglect, and are paired with a CASA volunteer, are more likely to find a safe, permanent home and to succeed in school, and are half as likely to re-enter the foster care system.

Rock Island County CASA

While Rock Island County originally had been home to a CASA program, the program lost funding years ago. In 2018, EveryChild (formerly the Child Abuse Council) received a generous grant from the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority to kickstart a CASA program in Rock Island County once again.

Over five years since the program began, the efforts of hard work are showing. Starting with seven advocates training in 2018, Rock Island County CASA now has over twenty-five volunteer advocates and has successfully closed many cases, with each of the children being placed in safe and loving homes. Several other cases are currently on their way to being successfully closed as well.

The heart and soul of the program is centered around the citizen-advocates who respond to the calling to help the little ones who have experienced so much trauma. CASA volunteers do not have to have a background in social work or hold special knowledge of any kind -- that is



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what training is for. The CASA coordinator explains that the most important quality of a CASA volunteer is a passion for kids; someone who is caring and compassionate.

Carrie M., a current CASA volunteer who responded to the call over four years ago, first learned about the CASA program from a press release in the newspaper. She says, “I drove around with that newspaper in my car, wondering if I would be capable of such a responsibility.” She explains that being a CASA is completely outside the scope of work that she does on a daily basis. Yet, she ultimately decided to give it a try. “I finally got the nerve to call, and I’m so glad I did.”

No matter the background or previous experience an advocate holds, they undergo training that covers all essential knowledge needed to ready each individual. Training is done one of two ways, depending on what best fits each volunteer class; it can be spread over the course of nine weeks, with three hours dedicated per week or done over two weekends 7-hours each day. Using National CASA curriculum, trainees learn about the child welfare and juvenile court systems. They also cover topics such as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), domestic violence, and substance abuse. Additionally, they walk through how to interview individuals and how to talk with kids. Carrie calls the training “thorough and consistent”, noting it equips volunteers with all the skills needed to be a successful advocate.

Once the volunteer goes through the training, they are ready to begin work. After a judge sends a referral, the CASA Program Coordinator assigns a CASA volunteer to the case. CASA volunteers are then required to stay on that case until it is closed. Each volunteer handles only one case at a time, and cases typically last around one to two years.

A CASA volunteer has several responsibilities. They collect information from several different sources, including the child, teachers, foster parents, family members, and other individuals close to the child. The child’s voice is particularly important; the CASA needs to take what they say into consideration on how to best support them and their needs and protect their well-being.

After collecting the information, the CASA volunteer shares it with the caseworker assigned to the child to make sure all parties are up to date. They also use the information to write case reports for each court hearing, which are given to the judge, the attorneys, and the guardian ad litem on the case. The insight from the CASA volunteer within the case report is taken into consideration by the judge, which Carrie finds to be very rewarding. She says, “It really feels like what we do makes a difference.”

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Through her experience as a CASA, Carrie notes she has “learned so much about the foster care system and how to have a positive impact.” She goes on to say, “The need for volunteers is great and so is the reward for those of us who have a heart for service.”

The ultimate goal is for every child in our county to have a CASA. While this is not currently feasible due to the large number of children in the system compared to the number of volunteers, we see the positive impact of advocates in the children’s lives.

And there is nothing but high praise for the current advocates as stated by the CASA Coordinator.

“Our volunteers are very caring, committed individuals that just want the best for these kiddos. And this is a volunteer position--they’re not getting paid to do this. They go through all this training and advocate for the children. They’re really good people. I’m very proud of all my volunteers.”

The CASA program is currently accepting applications for CASA volunteers for the training class taking place later this year. Go to www.foreverychild.org/casa or contact EveryChild at info@foreverychild.org for more information.

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Originally posted on the Now What? Blog on 11.11.20 The Now What? Blog served for nearly 7 years to

- 1. Normalize parents seeking support and help as a manner of child abuse prevention*
- 2. Engage community in how they can work to prevent child abuse*
- 3. Work to build resiliency in families through promotion of the 5 protective factors*

Maybe you coach a baseball team or you help care for the neighbor kids from time to time. You are investing in the safety and security of the children in our community. Because it truly does take a village to raise our children, we want to offer the tools needed to bring awareness and education to preventing child abuse.

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