

For children in need

CASA volunteers lend support to those in foster care

By **RACHEL REYNOLDS**

Tribune Correspondent

SOUTH BEND — In these difficult and uncertain times, we can be tempted to constrict, pull back, hunker down.

But it can also be a time to take a chance and be brave and open our hearts a little wider.

Someone like Sandra Collins can show us the way.

Collins is a CASA volunteer (court appointed special advocate), and she gives her time to hold a child's hand through the court system, a journey that the child would otherwise make alone.

In her role, she acts as a central point of information for children who are in foster homes and whose futures are being decided by the court.



She collects data from social workers, doctors, therapists, foster parents and family members and makes oral and written reports to the judge hearing the case.

“That is what gives you the ability to speak for a child – access to all the perspectives,” said Collins, an associate professor of management at the University of Notre Dame’s Mendoza College of Business.

In essence, she is a voice for each child because these children do not have lawyers.

“If you’re looking for a way to volunteer where your time would be really valued and important, you might want to consider being a CASA,” she said.

Collins, who has been a CASA for two years, not only makes phone calls and collects data, but she also plays with the children, reads to them and takes them on an occasional trip to McDonalds.

She currently manages two cases, one involving a single child and one involving three siblings. The children range in age from 2 to 7 years old.

Collins also has two children of her own.

Currently there are about 1,000 children in St. Joseph County in the care of the state Department of Social Services.

St. Joseph has the third-highest number of children in state care among all counties in Indiana, surpassed only by Marion and Lake counties.

The federal government has mandated that each child have an advocate, but the system is overwhelmed and only about 300 to 350 children have a CASA.

“In our county, there are probably about 700 kids on a waiting list to receive a CASA,” said Brenda Matuszkiewicz, executive director of CASA of St. Joseph County.

“We’ve got kind of a tall order on our plate here in St. Joseph to serve everyone.”

There are now 80 to 100 CASA volunteers in the county who vary widely in age and include teachers, professors, lawyers, housewives and retirees. The children assigned to CASAs range in age from babies to early 20s.

The organization is sponsoring an eight-week training session for new volunteers March 3 through April 23, on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. The training, totaling 32 hours, is held at the Juvenile Justice Center at 1000 S. Michigan St.

“We teach them soup to nuts on how to advocate for these children,” said Robin Smith, recruiter and trainer for CASA of St. Joseph County, which has been in existence since 1987.

People who are interested in volunteering must be at least 21 years of age and go through an application process that includes drug screening and background checks. To apply, people can contact Smith at (574) 235-5362 or at rsmith@jjconline.org.

There will be two more training sessions in 2009, one in June and July and the other in September and October.

“I would be just thrilled in getting 25 people per class,” said Matuszkiewicz.

Volunteers must meet once a month with the child or children assigned to them. On average, a CASA’s advocacy work involves a 10-hour-a-month time commitment, Smith said.

Statistics show that a CASA can make a profound impact on a child’s future. Ninety-five percent of kids with a CASA spend less time in the foster system than do their peers. And 90 percent of kids with a CASA do not re-enter the state welfare system, Matuszkiewicz said.

“I think that you’re making a huge impact on a child’s life,” she said. “Their family is in a traumatic state. You’re playing an instrumental role at a critical time ... I think a lot of people find that very rewarding.”

Smith added: “Our overall mission is to move these children from a questionable, unstable situation to a permanent, stable situation.”

What makes Collins such a good CASA?

Matuszkiewicz said Collins is professional, articulate and very respectful of the family and all the people involved in the case. She is also an excellent report writer.

“I think she’s a very calming presence. That’s just her,” Matuszkiewicz said. “I think that’s a great asset to have.”