

CASA gives abused, neglected children voice in court

MICHIANA POINT OF VIEW

By **BRENDA MATUSZKIEWICZ**

Last year 53 children in Indiana died from abuse or neglect.

Every year, more than 3 million children nationally are reported abused or neglected. Despite the states' attempts to help, many of these children become trapped in the court and child welfare maze and can spend their childhoods moving from one temporary shelter to another. This is where a person can step in by becoming a Court Appointed Special Advocate volunteer.

CASAs are volunteers who are appointed by judges in child abuse and neglect (Children in need of Services or CHINS) cases to research the case, review documents, interview people and make a report to the court as to what is in the best interest of abused or neglected children in terms of services, placement, visitation, reunification and permanency.

CASA volunteers are typically the only voice for children in these cases as Indiana law does not require an attorney to be appointed for children in CHINS cases. Some volunteer programs call their volunteers GAL, or guardian ad litem.

CASA volunteers undergo a thorough training and development program that consists of at least 30 hours of pre-service training, followed by 12 hours of yearly in-service training. Volunteers learn about courtroom procedure from the principals in the system -- judges, lawyers, social workers, court personnel and others. CASA volunteers also learn effective advocacy techniques for children, and are educated about specific topics ranging from child sexual abuse to early childhood development and adolescent behavior. After completion of the initial training, volunteers are sworn in as officers of the court. This gives them the legal authority to conduct research on the child's situation and submit reports to the court.

CASA volunteers are parties to the CHINS case under Indiana law. They are objective community volunteers who are not part of the child welfare system, who focus their efforts solely on gathering information and making recommendations regarding the children in CHINS cases, who would otherwise have no voice. Volunteers have a completely different role than the case manager in that their primary focus is not working with the parents to resolve their issues; instead, the CASA volunteer focuses solely on the needs of the child while a child is in foster care and for permanency. Volunteers are carefully screened and are required to be

well trained.

CASA volunteers monitor the child's situation while he or she is in foster care to make sure the child is safe and to make sure the psychological, physical, educational and other needs are met. Volunteers are often the only constant the child knows as he or she moves through the labyrinth of the child welfare system. Volunteers become very familiar with the children and their needs, since the children are their only focus, and typically CASA volunteers only advocate on two to three cases at a time.

CASA's inception dates back to 1977, when a Seattle judge concerned over making decisions about abused and neglected children's lives without sufficient information conceived a way to ensure their placement in a safe and loving environment. His idea to train community volunteers to speak for the best interests of children in court was so successful that, soon, judges across the country began utilizing citizen advocates.

In 1990, Congress encouraged the CASA program expansion with the passage of the Victims of Child Abuse Act. Today, more than 950 CASA program offices operate in 49 states, with more than 50,000 men and women serving as CASA volunteers. Approximately 83 percent of CASA programs have been active for more than a decade.

Currently, 65 of Indiana's 92 counties have an organized, volunteer CASA program. There are approximately 2,000 active volunteers in Indiana. In 2006, volunteers donated an estimated 343,722 hours to the children of Indiana. If volunteers had been paid the rate of \$50 an hour, the minimum rate paid to attorney guardians ad litem who perform this function, they would have contributed an estimated \$17.2 million to the state of Indiana in 2006. Sadly, there are currently more than 4,000 children on waiting lists at volunteer programs across Indiana. In 2007, there were more than 900 children adjudicated CHINS in St. Joseph County alone.

This summer the Indiana Retired Teachers Association held four workshops across the state, which took place in South Bend, Delphi/Lafayette, Pendleton and Corydon. During each workshop CASA directors from those cities delivered presentations about CASA with the intent of developing a partnership between the association and CASA. IRTA has chosen to partner with CASA as a statewide project for the next two years. Indiana's 23,000 retired teachers volunteer approximately 1 million hours per year to many worthwhile causes throughout the state. The National Retired Teachers Association is looking at Indiana to use the collaboration as a national project model. This fall, a press conference was held in Indianapolis and Gov. Mitch Daniels, Indiana Supreme Court Chief Justice Randall Shepard, the president of IRTA, Ralph Ayres, state CASA director, Leslie Dunn and several others announced the joint effort. We are excited in St. Joseph County and across the state about the possibility that we can increase the number of volunteers advocating for children in our communities.

Indiana's volunteer CASA programs are overseen and supported by the Indiana State

Office of GAL/CASA, which is part of court administration for the Indiana Supreme Court. The state office works closely with the Supreme Court Advisory Commission on CASA in developing and implementing standards for programs, developing best practices and promoting legislative and community awareness of CASA. For more information about CASA in Indiana, please call the Indiana State Office of GAL/CASA at (800) 542-0813.

The CASA Program of St. Joseph County is accepting applications for our next training session. Classes will be held March 4 through April 24 on Tuesday and Thursday evenings from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. at the Frederick Juvenile Justice Center. CASA volunteers must be at least 21 years old. Please call (574) 233-CASA for more information or visit www.sjccasa.org. You can also go to www.nationalcasa.org for more information and to find the program in your area.

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