



Journey of CASA Volunteers

April 2008

For 20 years in Georgia, every-day people have taken an extraordinary road to ensure that children in foster care have courtroom advocacy, access to services and resources, and the individual attention they deserve. These volunteers bring urgency to a child's situation, working tirelessly so that children do not languish in state custody. The goal is for children in foster care to find safety and permanency as soon as possible.

The Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) movement came to Georgia in 1988 with the help of three dedicated women. The first CASA volunteers, comprised of residents from Newton and Hall counties, were appointed in January 1989. Since that first class, over 6,900 volunteers have been a part of providing CASA advocacy in Georgia.



First CASA volunteers sworn-in - January 1989

In a volunteer training class, you might meet a nurse, grandfather, real estate agent, student, survivor of abuse, small business owner, attorney or retired teacher. If you ask volunteers about their initial involvement, you'll hear them talk about wanting to make a difference, their love for children, or a desire to give back to their community. What all volunteers come to share is a deep appreciation for what children can and do overcome, a great understanding and respect for adversity and resiliency, and an intimate knowledge of how parents, caregivers, and society treat children. Mary Eva DuBose, a CASA volunteer in Macon for 11 years, comments, "I have done many challenging and fulfilling things in my 76 years, but being a CASA runs a close second to my role as mother of my own children."

With first-hand knowledge, CASA volunteers make independent recommendations to a juvenile court judge regarding a child's current and future needs. While courtroom advocacy is the culmination of a CASA volunteer's work, there is much more that comprises their advocacy. CASA volunteers travel to make numerous visits and spend countless hours getting to know the children, meeting with their families, Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS) personnel and a variety of providers and professionals involved in the case, as well as review multiple court, medical, psychological and educational records. CASA volunteers know how to advocate for services and resources and engage family members in their cases. Ultimately, CASA volunteers help ensure that a child's needs and wishes are kept at the forefront of all pertinent decisions and are not overlooked.

CASA volunteers participate in 30 hours of training, including courtroom observation, to prepare them for this responsibility and the court's expectations. The training is a unique experience that builds camaraderie, support and connectedness to fellow volunteers and the CASA network. Once trained and appointed, CASA volunteers are supported on a daily basis by CASA directors and volunteer coordinators.

Last year alone, over 1,800 volunteers advocated for 9,000 children who had been placed in Georgia's custody. Unfortunately, many children in foster care are still without the individual attention of a CASA volunteer. The CASA network continues to recruit volunteers from around the state so that every child can experience the benefits of having a CASA.

The 20-year journey of CASA in Georgia has had the support of many people and organizations including juvenile court judges, child welfare professionals, legislators and funders. But without the dedication, diligence and compassion of thousands of former, current and future volunteers, Georgia would not be able to celebrate the collective achievements or envision a future in which all children have a volunteer advocate.

Anyone who is interested in making this kind of commitment to a child in their community is encouraged to visit www.gacasa.org for more information. ❖

This article is written in honor of all CASA volunteers by the Georgia CASA staff.



CASA Volunteers Bring a Sense of Urgency in Advocating for Children

Article #2 - Released June 19, 2008

After Pat Mann read several articles published in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* about abused and neglected children being returned to their families too soon or without needed services, she expressed her concerns to a friend who worked for the Department of Family and Children Services. He suggested she take her energy and compassion to an organization called CASA – Court Appointed Special Advocates.

That was 15 years ago.

“When I started at the CASA program there were only two of us in the county,” said Mann, who began volunteering for the organization in 1993. “I have such a passion for the children, and because there were only two of us, I took every case that was assigned to me.”



Since 1998, the network of CASA programs throughout Georgia has advocated for the best interests of thousands of abused and neglected children. In fact, in 2007 alone, over 1,800 volunteers served over 9,000 children.

“It’s not always an easy job,” said Karen Prince, a business owner and interior decorator who has been a CASA volunteer since 2006. “But it’s always an important one -- not just for the children, but also for me.”

CASA in Georgia has followed the same mission for the past 20 years – to recruit, screen, train and supervise community volunteers to advocate for the best interests of abused and neglected children involved in juvenile court deprivation proceedings.

“There are four types of deprivation that cause children to come into this system,” said Prince. “Three are abuse: sexual, physical and emotional. The other is neglect and it’s what we see the most of here.”

Neglect is a type of maltreatment that occurs when a parent or caretaker allows a child to experience avoidable suffering or fails to provide basic essentials for physical, social and emotional development.¹ Examples include failure to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, education, medical care and supervision.

In 2007, according to “Child Welfare in Georgia” or House Bill 1406, Georgia’s Child Protective Services received 92,184 reports of deprivation. Of those, 14,402 were screened out (determined to be unwarranted of an investigation) and 27,632 were referred to other service providers rather than opening an ongoing case. The remaining 50,150 were accepted to receive some form of service from the agency. A total of 74,890 children were involved in these investigations of maltreatment. Of these children, 9,145 entered foster care.

Once in foster care, children are placed in an emergency shelter, with a fit-and-willing relative, in a foster or group home or an institution (in situations that require an additional level of care and supervision). There were 22,123 children in the state’s custody at some point during 2007.

There, many of these children remain -- waiting for their parents to achieve the skills necessary for properly caring for them or correct the behavior that caused the deprivation to occur.

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“Many times the children sit and wait too long. Many times it seems like they’re waiting forever,” said Tim Lewis, a long-time resident of Lee County and an Americus attorney who often works in juvenile court. “That’s why CASAs are all working so hard to see that these children’s needs get met as quickly and as appropriately as possible.”



A recent analysis performed by the Pew Charitable Trust estimated that in 2007, the total annual cost of child abuse in the United States was \$103.8 billion. According to the report, this total represents more than \$33 billion in direct costs of child maltreatment, including judicial, foster care, law enforcement and health system responses, and \$70 billion in indirect costs, including long-term economic effects. The cost of providing foster care alone, including local, state and federal dollars, was \$23 billion in 2004. And with over 800,000 confirmed reports of child abuse and neglect across America in 2007 and over 500,000 children in foster care, it is easy to see how many of these children get lost in the system.

But CASAs provide individualized attention to each child, bringing an urgency to his/her needs.

“CASAs bring an independent and urgent voice on behalf of their assigned children,” said Cordele Circuit Juvenile Court Judge Chris Hughes. “They are the eyes and ears of the Court – they help me see each and every child.”

Mann embraces her role as a strong voice for these children.

“I find peace knowing I’m going to bat for these children,” said Mann, who was removed from her home when she was eight years old as a result of deprivation. “Hopefully, the insight I bring and the research I gather, will help me understand what the child is feeling and what the child needs.”

Mann, and almost 2,000 other CASA volunteers across Georgia, take the information they gather through their investigations and provide comprehensive, objective reports to the juvenile courts so judges have the information necessary to make decisions with the best interests of each child in mind. CASAs work tirelessly to involve and engage the courts, social services and community service providers and to ensure the child’s individual needs are addressed through appropriate placement, services and ultimately a permanent home.

“It is probably the most rewarding thing that I have done,” said Mann, who was born in Conyers, but raised in Atlanta, “knowing that I’ve made a difference in the world by making a difference in the lives of the children.” ❖

Article written by Brad Ray, Executive Director, GSW CASA (Americus)

¹ Prevent Child Abuse Georgia - <http://www.preventchildabusega.org/html/neglect.html>





Community Partnership: A CASA Way of Life

Article #3 - Released July 24, 2008

Successful partnerships incorporate many elements. Among them are common goals, mutual trust, and open, honest communication. From the earliest days, CASA programs in Georgia have sought such partnerships, both through education and engagement of the community and collaboration with other stakeholders. The goal of these partnerships is always improved outcomes for children in foster care.

For CASA, the most significant community involvement exists within the realm of the child welfare and juvenile court systems. These systems operate under a multitude of federal and state laws, rules, and policies; therefore, engaging community members becomes a difficult task. Through CASA, community volunteers gain a greater understanding of the needs of children and families and of the importance of community-based services to meet those needs. Towards these ends, CASA creates opportunities for awareness and involvement of the community at large.

This type of community involvement would not have been possible without the support of juvenile court judges across the state that opened their courtrooms to community volunteers. In addition, cooperation from the Department of Human Resources (DHR) and the Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) allows CASA volunteers to quickly gather information and develop meaningful, fact-based recommendations.

Fostering a partnership with local DFCS personnel was not easy in the beginning. "It took time and patience to develop a working relationship with DFCS," states Asun Ellis, long-time executive director of Thomas County CASA (in existence for over 15 years). Many DFCS employees were initially resistant to the idea of sharing access to confidential records. Many also questioned whether community volunteers could consistently provide quality recommendations when considering the complex issues of child welfare. It took about three years, says Asun, before the local DFCS office would willingly accept CASA's involvement.

Through the steady efforts of early CASA volunteers and staff, though, the groundwork was laid for thriving DFCS-CASA partnerships across the state. As front-line workers witnessed the diligence and sincerity of the CASA network, they began to develop trust and appreciation for CASA's work. When these case managers transferred to new county offices, they carried with them positive impressions of the power of community volunteerism. Quite recently, upon moving to a non-CASA county, a DFCS supervisor was even heard to lament the loss of CASA input. "I sure will miss CASA," she said.

DFCS case managers now regularly contact CASA volunteers for their opinions and assistance. In a recent case, a DFCS case manager asked CASA Teena Henderson to investigate a child's delayed enrollment in a new school system. When Teena provided answers, the case manager followed up to ensure the child was enrolled without further delay. Ultimately, as these close partnerships increase across the state, it is our foster children who will reap the rewards.



Local DFCS-CASA relationships are strengthened by a strong state level relationship that involves DHR and Georgia CASA. In 1999, the first Statewide CASA/DFCS Protocol formally acknowledged CASA's role at the state level and standardized the relationship between local offices on many important issues. A decade later, DFCS has come to expect a high degree of consistency and professionalism from CASA. It is a credit to CASA volunteers from across the state that such high expectations have been established.

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Georgia CASA has also partnered with a variety of other groups in the state. Georgia CASA has been supported by several agencies and groups, including the Council of Juvenile Court Judges, Committee on Justice for Children, the Georgia Bar Association, Junior Leagues, Service League and Kappa Alpha Theta sorority.

Local CASA programs are also engaged in many collaborative activities. CASA programs actively participate in Family Connection strategy teams and local child abuse councils. In some locations, CASA personnel have taken a leadership role in the implementation of various prevention and intervention strategies, such as the Community Partnership for Protecting Children (CPPC). In turn, such joint activities have further opened communication so that various agencies are more aware of CASA's mission; these agencies are more willing to respond openly when a CASA volunteer calls seeking information about a particular child or parent.

In a sense, developing "community partnerships" defines the work of CASA for each and every foster child. Whether working towards family reunification or some other outcome, the CASA volunteer advocates for a network of services so that each child will become part of a stable, loving family receiving the benefits of formal and informal supports that increase the likelihood of safety and permanency. For as long as Georgia children and their families need such assistance, CASA programs in Georgia will seek to develop the partnerships that encourage such positive results. Whether on a personal or agency level, whether state-wide or local, it is ultimately partnership – common goals, mutual trust, open communication – that can bring about happy endings for the abused, neglected and abandoned children of our state. ❖

Article written by Greg Millette, Executive Director, Coastal Plain CASA (Tifton)





CASA Volunteers Provide Individualized Attention to Children

Article #4 - Released August 25, 2008

It is most often extremely difficult for children, even though they have been neglected or otherwise victimized in their own homes, to cope with being removed from home and placed in unfamiliar surroundings with strangers. Once a child is found to be deprived, a systematic approach guided by federal and state laws, as well as DFCS (Department of Family and Children Services) policy, comes into play to address a family's needs with the goal to reunify them as quickly as possible. The CASA volunteer strives to keep the emphasis on the individual needs of the children he/she is assigned.

The CASA volunteer plays a unique role amongst those who strive to create and implement a plan to best serve the family's immediate emotional and physical needs while simultaneously preparing for a resolution in which the child will be placed in a safe, permanent home. Many of the DFCS case managers and attorneys who serve deprived children wrestle with the burdens of high caseloads and time constraints while the CASA volunteer is most often assigned to only one or two cases at a time. This practice enables the CASA volunteer to provide individualized attention, focusing on the unique needs and wishes of each child that is served.

The opportunity to provide individualized attention enhances the CASA volunteer's ability to observe and analyze the many facets of the child's situation and the dynamics of the child's family. The 40-hour pre-service training, coupled with the annual in-service training requirements, imparts to the CASA volunteers the importance of being vigilant and responsive—even to seemingly trivial matters, as these issues are often perceived by the child as being monumental.

For example, a case manager may not be made aware of each child's religious and spiritual values. When a child is placed with a family whose religious traditions conflict with her own customary worship habits, it can be extremely distressing for the child.

Recently, a CASA volunteer encountered a nine-year-old child who expressed extreme uneasiness in her foster home, but was reluctant to discuss the source of her despair. Because of the relationship built with the child, the CASA volunteer was able to determine that the child's deep distress resulted from being compelled to worship on Saturday with her foster family rather than on Sunday as her beliefs entailed. Her case worker did not share the same concern, but when the CASA volunteer spoke about this matter during a court hearing, the judge issued an order to place the child in a home with more compatible religious practices.

Unfortunately, children are often placed in a series of foster homes before permanency can be achieved. When this occurs, the child's assigned CASA volunteer is quite possibly the only constant figure in the child's life. As the child is moved from placement to placement and the case is transferred from case manager to case manager, vital information can be lost. Due to a CASA volunteer's ability to provide individualized attention to each child, the impact of missing information and knowledge can be minimized or eliminated altogether.

One CASA volunteer's due diligence was instrumental in the discovery of discrepancies in a fifteen year old girl's daily prescription medication regimen. Because the girl's placements kept changing, some of her medications had not been refilled and others had been added. Her CASA volunteer obtained a current list of the medications being administered and requested a professional evaluation. Once the appropriate dosages were determined and administered regularly, the girl was better equipped to cope with her difficult situation. Had it not been for the individualized attention her CASA volunteer provided, the girl could have easily continued to receive improper dosages that would have caused her additional, unnecessary harm.

The individualized attention that CASA volunteers provide to the children they serve as described in the two instances above are repeated in countless cases across the state and country and recognized in juvenile courtrooms as insightful and reliable. A 2005 National CASA Association survey found that Georgia juvenile court judges consider CASA volunteers' reports very useful in making decisions about a child's safety, permanency, and well-being. The unique vantage point and the wealth of support and information contributed by CASA volunteers are remarkably effective in bringing relevant and important details to juvenile court proceedings, ultimately resulting in better outcomes for deprived children. ❖

Article written by Deborah M. Bickers, Volunteer Coordinator, CASA of Paulding County (Dallas, GA)





CASA Volunteers - Promoting Safety, Permanency and Well-Being

Article #5 - Released October 10, 2008

CASA volunteers work each day to promote the safety, permanency and well-being of the abused, neglected and abandoned children they serve. A CASA volunteer may often be the only consistent person in a child's life throughout the duration of his case due to changes in caseloads, staff turnover, placement changes and multiple service providers. This consistency often creates a relationship between a child and his CASA volunteer that brings attention to the child's immediate safety and well-being. The CASA volunteer's involvement alone might provide reassurance to the child that there is someone looking out for his best interests. The CASA volunteer is able to bring concerns and recommendations to the court's attention.

I have found this to be very true in my role as a CASA volunteer in Douglas County, Georgia. For example, a CASA volunteer could be assigned to a case in which the mother's ex-boyfriend, a drug dealer, is still occasionally staying in the home. Obviously, it would not be safe for this child to immediately return home to his mother if she could not yet provide a safe, secure home for him. A CASA volunteer would be able to stay abreast of this situation that may be overlooked if someone is not able to pay as close attention to each detail of the case. These types of interventions will often go unnoticed by the child, but ultimately ensures he is safe when he returns home, with a greatly decreased chance of being re-abused and returned to the state's custody.

I grew up in a small town in north Florida with biological parents that loved and provided for me. I believed my experience to be a common one – that everyone had these same advantages. It wasn't until I attended college (away from the protective "umbrella" of home) that I realized I was, in fact, very blessed to have experienced life with both birth parents, giving me love and provision. Sadly, I now know that I took that safety and permanency for granted.

On an average day in Georgia, almost 13,000 children are in the legal custody of the State. These are children who have been removed from their homes and placed in foster care because their parents can't – or won't – take care of them. Nationwide, over 500,000 children are in foster care. Just think – CASA volunteers have the opportunity to ensure a child's safety and well-being are being protected. And above all, they advocate for a permanent and stable family to bring a brighter future to each child. Every time I get melancholy over a child's situation, I remember this and become further motivated in my work as a CASA volunteer.

Article written by Wendy Blackstock, CASA Volunteer, Children's Voice: CASA (Douglasville, GA)

The 40-hour CASA volunteer training is both an eye-opener and good preparation for being a child advocate in Georgia's child welfare system. Some of the concepts were new to me when I attended training in the fall of 2005. The "minimum level of care" idea taught me to look at a child's circumstances from a different perspective than my own. I needed to understand that by providing food, shelter, clothing and education, a family could get by. This might not include clothing in the latest fashions, a home with a computer, or a HD T.V. More importantly, I needed to consider if the family and home would provide a safe place for the child to grow up healthy and educated.

What permanency means to children is often a home on the holidays and someone to call when they're in trouble or need advice. Without a permanent connection, children aging out of the foster care system have few connections to adults and family, few resources and little hope. As a CASA volunteer, I do my best to identify options for family connections, increase access to life skills training, uncover hidden potentials and keep children motivated in school.

I strongly believe a good education is the foundation for a child's financial security and future. When children are kept out of school repeatedly, as is sometimes the situation when children are moved from one placement to another, it denies them this foundation. Graduating from high school with good grades will open doors that would have been shut under different circumstances. As a former teacher, I've seen first hand the impact of educational neglect on children. As a CASA volunteer, I can work to ensure the children I serve have chances and opportunities that they might not have had if a CASA volunteer was not involved.

In Douglas County, I have had the fortunate experience to work with Judge Peggy Walker and Judge Michelle Harrison on the bench. They are both strong supporters of CASA who listen to the recommendations of CASA volunteers and value our input. Every day, CASA volunteers bring valuable information to courtrooms that help judges make decisions to protect a child's safety, promote a child's well-being and ensure permanency for a child living in foster care. These decisions help to provide a better future where the child can thrive!

The bottom line is that CASA volunteers offer children a better chance at life! CASA volunteers provide additional manpower and an outside perspective to the entire child welfare system so that more children are kept safe, attention is focused on their overall well-being and they are placed in permanent homes. ❖



CASA through the Eyes of Juvenile Court Judges

Article #6 - Released December 12, 2008

When Juvenile Court Judge Chris Hughes saw the impact volunteers willing to advocate for abused, neglected and abandoned children had on the deprivation process, he knew he wanted to bring Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) to the Cordele Judicial Circuit. Like Judge Hughes, the support of judges across the state and nation has contributed greatly to the CASA movement, and their continued involvement is vital to the expansion of CASA's advocacy for deprived children in Georgia.

Across the 49 judicial circuits of Georgia, over 130 juvenile court judges (some of which are part-time) preside over several areas, including child support enforcement, delinquency (criminal acts committed by minor children) and deprivation (the abuse, neglect and/or abandonment of children). CASA operates in the area of deprivation, whereby volunteers advocate for the best interests of abused, neglected and/or abandoned children, encouraging safety and permanency as quickly as possible. However, the only way a CASA program may exist and begin to develop is if a juvenile court judge within the appropriate judicial circuit extends an invitation.

"I knew I wanted CASAs in my courtroom," said Judge Hughes, whose circuit consists of Ben Hill, Crisp, Dooly and Wilcox counties. "Our two guardians ad litem at the time were amazing and dedicated, but it just wasn't possible for two people to do the investigations, reporting and meetings required for all of these children."

So, Judge Hughes spoke with community leaders, the two guardians ad litem, several other juvenile court judges, and Georgia CASA before he extended the official invitation to start a CASA program.

"And then it happened – within a year, almost every child who came into the custody of the Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS) was assigned a CASA, a dedicated person who would advocate for that particular child, based on specific needs and resources," said Judge Hughes. "The program placed urgency on the process and increased the momentum of helping these kids."

While courts differ in the types of local programs and community-based services available to children and families, most all of them have one factor in common – insufficient resources to help all of

the children and families who appear in the courtrooms. This factor extends as well to other governmental agencies that work closely with the courts, making it hard to truly meet the needs of children and families. CASA volunteers are able to step in and focus solely on each child.

Since the creation of Georgia CASA 20 years ago, in 1988, the CASA program has advocated for over 34,000 children statewide. In 2007 alone, over 1,870 volunteers served over 8,760 children.

"I hold these volunteers in very high regard," said Paulding County Juvenile Court Judge Sandra W. Miller. "It is a very special role they hold and Court would be worse off without them."

Judge Miller, who has presided over juvenile court for over six years (and was the Special Assistant Attorney General who represented DFCS in deprivation proceedings prior to becoming judge), works with the volunteers as they train to become CASAs. In order to become a CASA volunteer, individuals must be at least 21 years old, commit to volunteer for at least one year, consent to local, state and national criminal background checks, and complete 30 hours of facilitated training and 10 hours of observation. In addition, CASAs must receive 12 hours of annual in-service continuing education training credits.

"During their training, I tell the volunteers they are professionals in the courtroom and I view them as the voice of the children," said Judge Miller, who participates in at least an hour of each training program.

Lisa Jones, Juvenile Court Judge for the Southwestern Judicial Circuit (consisting of Lee, Macon, Schley, Stewart, Sumter and Webster counties), said the CASA recommendations provide insight and information that helps judges make their decisions.

"I rely on CASAs to provide the Court with an independent recommendation specific to each child," said Judge Jones. "It is comforting to know CASAs are meeting with these children, their families, their doctors and teachers -- with all those who impact the children's lives -- and compiling all of this information in a report to the court."

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For each new case assigned, CASAs are expected to perform a thorough investigation, researching medical, educational, psychological and various other reports and exams, and meeting with the child and those people in the child's life. CASAs then write recommendations to the court that express each child's needs and wishes, including a suggested permanency plan for each child. Outside of court, CASAs monitor the case, meet with the child at least monthly until he/she has reached safety and permanency, and inform other parties of significant changes or concerns.

"CASAs bring an independent and urgent voice on behalf of their assigned children," said Judge Hughes. "They are the eyes and ears of the Court – they help me see each and every child."

What do Judges ask CASA programs for most often?

"More volunteers," said Judge Hughes. "We still need more dedicated volunteers."

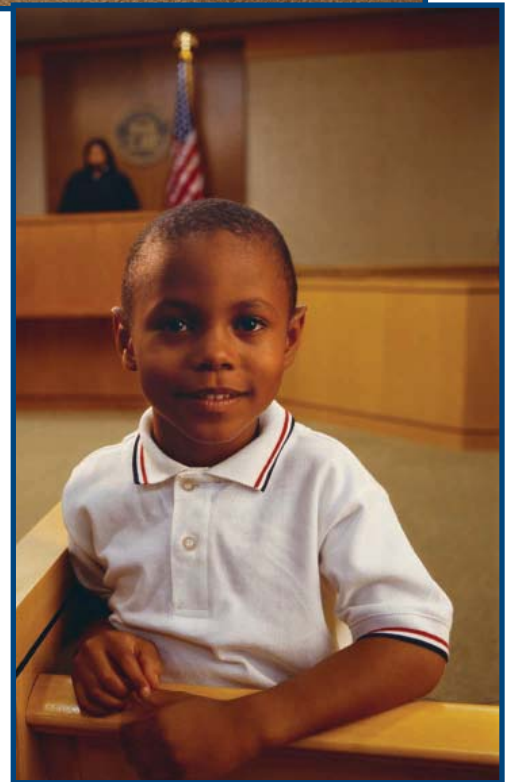
Even with the impressive number of volunteers serving deprived children in Georgia, last year CASAs served only 40% of all deprived children statewide. In 2005, the National CASA Association engaged Organizational Research Services to conduct a national survey of family court judges. Of the 550 judges and commissioners who completed the survey, 90% were using CASA volunteers in their courts. The research showed that while judges found CASA volunteers to be very effective, and their input valuable, only six percent "strongly agreed" that there were sufficient volunteers to meet the need.

"Whenever someone expresses an interest in helping deprived children, I tell them to call CASA," said Judge Jones. "I am thankful for each and every CASA."

When asked to sum up the qualities of a CASA volunteer, Judge Miller used one word.

"Dedication," said Judge Miller. "They are dedicated to making lives of children better – and that's what it's all about."

Without the continued support of judges throughout the state, the CASA organization's capacity to advocate for deprived children would be vastly limited. Thank you to all the judges who support the CASA program in Georgia! ❖



Article written by Brad Ray, Executive Director, Sowega CASA (Americus)



Advocating for a Child's Best Interests: The Role of CASA in Juvenile Court

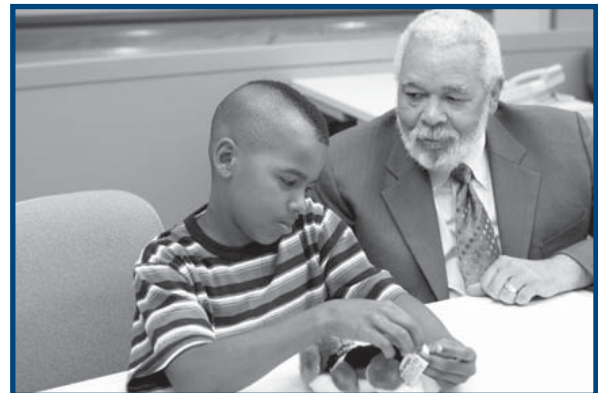
Article #7 - Released February 5, 2009

In 1977, a superior court judge in Seattle, Washington, recognized that he did not have enough information upon which to base life-changing decisions regarding a child's future. Enlisting the help of a group of volunteers, the Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) movement began. In the early years, CASA volunteers were likely the sole representative a child had in the courtroom. Seen as "subjects" to the proceedings, children were not considered interested parties and thus did not necessarily require legal representation. The CASA volunteer was there to "speak up for a child" and was the "child's [only] voice in court." It is no wonder that these phrases became slogans trademarked by The National CASA Association and were prevalently used throughout the early stages of the organization's existence. Arguably, it was the innovative use of community volunteers that made the program immensely popular and spurred its momentum both nationally and in Georgia.

Over the last thirty years, amazing strides have been made in the field of child advocacy and juvenile law. Because of several transitional court cases and statutory enactments, juvenile court proceedings have evolved from being viewed as "kiddie court" to demanding the same level of respect as adult courts. With the formalization of juvenile court processes and procedures, children are often considered interested parties to the proceedings and are increasingly afforded more legal rights and better protection. The most significant change relevant to CASA programs is that many children now have an additional representative in court, through the appointment of an attorney. With the dual appointment of a CASA volunteer and an attorney, a child's best interests and legal rights are better represented.

Under the federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), both attorneys and CASAs are permissible to serve as a child's Guardian Ad Litem (GAL). By definition, a GAL is an individual who has received training and been appointed by the court to protect and represent the best interests of abused and neglected children. In order to fulfill CAPTA requirements and receive federal grant funding for use in the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect cases, each state must provide for the appointment of a GAL to every child. Georgia law provides for the appointment of a GAL in deprivation cases, whereby a trained attorney or CASA volunteer, or both, may fulfill the role.

In practice, a deprived child may be represented solely by a CASA volunteer or an attorney, by an attorney and a CASA volunteer, or in some areas around the state, by neither an attorney nor a CASA volunteer. As a lay GAL, an appointed CASA volunteer always advocates for the best interests of a child by promoting his or her safety, permanency and well-being through independent recommendations to the court. Contrarily, when an attorney is appointed to represent a child, the attorney may either represent the best interests of a child as an additional guardian ad litem, or if the court follows the traditional client-driven model, the attorney represents a child's expressed wishes. Under both scenarios, the attorney seeks to protect a child's legal interests and may proffer evidence and file motions.



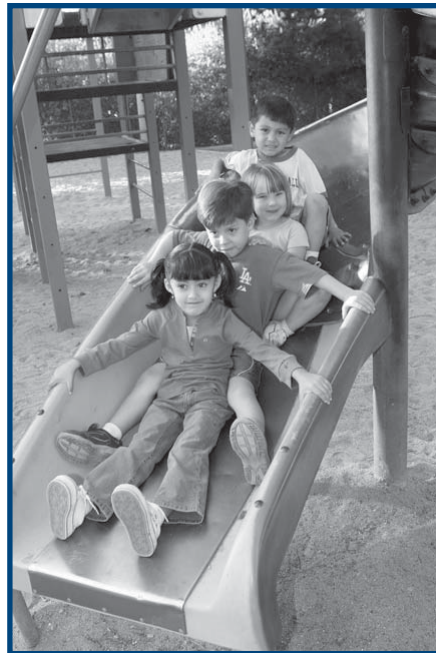
The CASA volunteer plays a significant role in a child's case no matter the capacity in which an attorney is appointed. Because CASA volunteers are only assigned one or two cases at a time, the CASA volunteer is able to devote a substantial amount of time and provide individualized attention to each child's case. CASA volunteers also bring a great deal of information to the court that might not otherwise be presented through comprehensive reports and compelling testimony. Furthermore, outside of the courtroom, CASA volunteers are community partners, working alongside the Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS) and other providers. With the incredible amount of energy spent on each case, CASA volunteers bring a sense of urgency to each and every child for whom they advocate. An attorney alone would not be expected, nor compensated, to fulfill all of the roles of a CASA volunteer. Since many attorneys who represent deprived children also have large caseloads and competing demands, the appointment of a CASA volunteer is vital to ensuring adequate information regarding a child's best interests is presented to the court.

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Georgia juvenile law continues to evolve, and legislation is expected to be introduced in the near future that seeks to distinguish the roles of an attorney and GAL. Such a distinction causes CASA's advocacy to become even more critical, as it makes the CASA volunteer the sole individual advocating for the best interests of a child in court. As the 20th anniversary of CASA in Georgia begins to close, a great opportunity presents itself for the CASA network. The demand for CASA volunteers will grow greater than ever before in the organization's history, as the child welfare system looks to CASA as the preferred GAL to satisfy CAPTA requirements. However, with this opportunity comes the responsibility of sufficiently meeting the need to provide a CASA volunteer for each child who need one and to ensure that CASA advocacy is of the highest quality.

If you are interested in volunteering with the CASA organization in your area, please visit www.gacasa.org. ❖

Article written by Angela Tanzella and Kelli James, Georgia CASA





Board Members and Donors: Crucial to the Success of CASA

Article #8 - Released April 8, 2009

Thirty-five years ago, just out of undergraduate school, I worked for the Department of Health, Education and Welfare as a program analyst. I spent three years traveling through impoverished areas in the South, conducting interviews with public assistance recipients. All of the cases involved children, and many of them had been neglected or abused in some way. I was not a social worker, so it was relatively easy to be a detached observer. I spent a few hours with the family, wrote up my findings, and moved on to the next case.

Five years ago, I decided it was time to get involved. I learned about Georgia CASA and its work as a voice for the kind of children I saw daily all those years ago. I became a member of the Georgia CASA Board of Directors and have willingly given my time and money to its cause. I have been Vice Chair of the Board for the past two years, and beginning in July, I will serve as Chair for the next two years. In my work on the Board, I completely agree with what fellow board member Kristin Sickling with Coastal Plain CASA (Tifton, Georgia) says, "Through my work with CASA, I know that I am making a difference in the lives of children! If even one child is protected from abuse or neglect, the work I do and the money I donate will be well worth it."

A nonprofit organization cannot fulfill its mission to meet the needs of the community it serves without board members and donors who are willing to be involved, both actively and financially. Board members provide important leadership roles in establishing the goals and objectives of the nonprofit as well as offering a diversity of opinion that helps formulate sound policy decisions. They also lead and participate in special events and help with fundraising, whether directly or indirectly, through established community contacts. Donors can include individuals, foundations, corporations, and government entities, as well as in-kind donors. They provide the financial life blood that a nonprofit needs in order to keep operating. Donors are essentially the safety net that allows most nonprofits to meet their operating budgets each year.

Georgia CASA was founded by Karen N. Sibley in 1988, along with co-founders Kathie Gannon and Nicki Vaughan. All three of these women were pivotal to the success of the CASA organization in Georgia through their involvement as founders and later as members of the Board of Directors of Georgia CASA. They still support CASA today as donors. Karen Sibley and Nicki Vaughan are now Life Board Members, as are six other individuals. There have been many other Board members who have been instrumental to CASA, not only at Georgia CASA, but also statewide. Throughout the state, over 500 people currently serve as board members of the CASA organizations in their communities.

Also pivotal to CASA's success in Georgia have been major donors of Georgia CASA throughout the years. Some of the largest foundational and governmental donors in Georgia CASA's history have included the Georgia Bar Foundation, Georgia Department of Human Resources, Goizueta Foundation, Joseph B. Whitehead Foundation, and other anonymous foundations and donors.

For Georgia CASA, its donors enable the organization to continue the expansion of CASA across the state and provide needed services to its affiliate programs. These services give affiliates tools to enable them to provide the highest quality of advocacy possible to the children served. As stakeholders in the CASA organization, we should all be working together toward a shared vision for each abused or neglected child involved in juvenile court proceedings to have a CASA volunteer to advocate for his/her best interests and be placed in a safe, permanent home where he/she can thrive.

Board members and donors give of their time and money because they believe the cause is worthy. They like to feel that their contributions make a difference in the lives of others. It is important that CASA's financial supporters know their donations have a direct effect on the children that need their help. Georgia CASA's most recent financial audit indicated that 90% of the funds received are passed through to the affiliates as they work to provide CASA volunteers for the children in their communities.

The world, as we as we once knew it, has changed dramatically over the past six months. We face a more uncertain future. Government budgets everywhere are in deficit and many services available to the most vulnerable members of our society are being reduced. The children CASA serves will continue to need strong advocacy both in and out of the courtroom. As Priscilla Olson, Board Chair of Mountain Circuit CASA, (Toccoa, Georgia) shares, "While the circumstances of the children we serve are often overwhelming, I am proud of the work done by CASA volunteers in their efforts to be a child's voice in court. I am further encouraged by the compassion and generosity that exists in my community and the willingness of neighbors to support these efforts." The efforts of CASA's board members and donors will be more important than ever if CASA is to fulfill its shared vision for a safe and permanent home for each child in need. ❖

Article written by Frank Inman, Vice Chair, Georgia CASA Board of Directors



Building an Agenda for Success

Article #9 - Released June 16, 2009

Anniversaries are milestones that allow a time for celebration, a time to reflect on the past, and a time to renew passion and commitment for the future. Over the past year, we have celebrated the 20th Anniversary of CASA in Georgia with several feature articles on the unique aspects of CASA advocacy, as well as the people that have helped make the growth of the CASA organization possible.

Upon reflecting over the past twenty years, a common theme emerges – the unwavering, dedication of individuals who give of themselves for a higher good. It is apparent that CASA in Georgia is no longer a fledging organization, but rather a mature, credible, and respected network. There are many indicators of CASA's success. The unanimous passage of House Bill 270 in 2007 speaks volumes of the image CASA has throughout the state as does the growth of CASA into 83% of the counties and 94% of the judicial circuits, indicating that success breeds success. Perhaps most significant of all is the impact CASA has had on the lives of thousands of abused, neglected, and abandoned children over the years. We can all certainly be proud of what has been accomplished by CASA in Georgia.

The next twenty years will be even better for CASA. Why? Because of the legacy that we, as the dedicated people that make up the CASA network, will build. Will it be easy? Not always. We have learned that things change. The system we work in is ever changing. Subsequently, we are thrust into a role that transcends the heartfelt passion of “doing good” to one that requires us to perform at a high level for courts, government agencies, community partners, lawyers, and our funders. We must demonstrate our effectiveness as a high quality advocacy organization that is a critical piece of the child welfare system and search for ways to define and measure terms like “high-impact organization” and “added value.” At the same time, we cannot lose sight of our core mission and the very reason we exist: to advocate for the safety, permanency, and well-being of abused, neglected, and abandoned children. We simply cannot be the very best advocates for children if we are not striving to be the very best we can be organizationally.

Like many organizations, we will face challenges. We need to engage in strategic discussions about how to better serve children in these ever-changing times. We need to focus on building an agenda that includes maintaining relevancy in the child welfare

system, building the capacity of CASA affiliate programs, improving the quality of courtroom advocacy, and strengthening the CASA network affiliation. Every time I see the Verizon television commercial, I am reminded of CASA. In the commercial, the man stands alone with his cell phone, attempting to get a signal, and off to the side are thousands of people representing backup for the Verizon network. Think of the CASA volunteer in the courtroom as the one advocate for the child. Now, think of all the thousands of people representing the CASA network as backup for the CASA volunteer and the child. We are all accountable to ensure that the CASA network is connected by common purposes, shared values, continual learning, high standards, and a strong support system.

I learned about a remarkable concept a few years ago that pertained to organizations with multiple entities being able to balance ‘high affiliation’ and ‘high autonomy.’ In my words, this means that each entity (affiliate CASA program) operates with a high level of independence, but also realizes the great value in being affiliated with a larger network (CASA in Georgia). Leslie Crutchfield and Heather McLeod Grant state it this way in their book, *Forces for Good*: **“High-impact nonprofits work with and through other organizations and individuals to create more impact than they could have ever achieved alone.”**

The Georgia CASA Board of Directors and staff are in the process of developing a new five-year strategic plan. All of our stakeholders and affiliates will be asked for input in its development. Let's seize this opportunity to come together as a network and build the right agenda for success in our future. As the environment of child welfare continues to change, we must ensure that Georgia CASA identifies and captures the strategies that will provide the maximum benefit not just to the CASA network, but more importantly to all of the abused, neglected, and abandoned children in our state. My hope is that the above-mentioned concepts of ‘high affiliation’ and ‘high autonomy’ are not just notions, but a reality for CASA in Georgia. After all, it is the least we can do for the unwavering, dedicated individuals who give of themselves for a higher good. Let us make sure that CASA's future impact on the child welfare system goes above and beyond what we have already accomplished! ❖

Article written by Duaine Hathaway, Executive Director of Georgia CASA