



CASA Volunteers - Promoting Safety, Permanency and Well-Being

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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. ❖