



CASA Volunteers Bring a Sense of Urgency in Advocating for Children

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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>

