



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.