



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)



In celebration of 20 years of CASA in Georgia, a series of twelve articles from Georgia CASA will be shining a spotlight on the unique qualities of CASA advocacy and the people that make it possible.

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 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 was assigned to a case in which the mother's ex-boyfriend, a drug dealer, is still occasionally staying in the home. Obviously, it is not 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 might be overlooked if someone is not able to pay as close attention to each detail of the case. These types of interventions will go unnoticed by the child, but ultimately ensures he is safe when he returns home, with a greatly decreased chance of being 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 was 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 safety 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 while 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 to 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 a 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 resources and little hope. As a CASA volunteer, I do my best to identify options for family connections, increase access to CASA 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 in 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 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 courtroom to help judges make decisions to protect a child's safety, protect 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.