

OUR OPINION: Advocates give voice to abused, neglected youngsters

GEORGIA'S FORGOTTEN CHILDREN

An occasional series on the state's foster care system

Staff

No one spoke up for Janice Davis when she and her sister were growing up with an abusive mother who beat them and tied them to their beds. But now, the Roswell businesswoman is speaking up for children enduring similar maltreatment.

Davis is one of 1,326 Court Appointed Special Advocates (or CASAs) in Georgia. They represent abused and neglected children who have been removed from their homes by the state Division of Family and Children Services. CASAs volunteer their time and must undergo background screening and 10 weeks of training.

CASAs investigate and report back to the courts on the best placements for the children. Their mission is to find a safe and permanent home for each child as quickly as possible.

"I just don't think that child welfare is all the state's responsibility," says Davis, 51, whose own troubled childhood --- at a time when abuse was a private tragedy rather than a public concern --- enables her to relate to abused children. "I think all of us have a part."

"It is not the typical volunteer job where you go for a weekend and build a house," says CASA advocacy director Allyson Anderson. "You are asked up front to make a one-year commitment because that's the minimal time it takes a child welfare case to work its way through the process."

Last year, CASAs statewide represented 6,382 of the 14,000 children in state custody. The organization's goal is to have a CASA for every child, a goal that cannot be achieved without more volunteers.

CASAs play a pivotal role in deciding whether a child goes home to mom, to grandma or to an adoptive family. They do the fact-gathering and investigations that social workers are too overburdened to do. In some cases, it's the extraordinary effort of a CASA volunteer that keeps a child from growing up in foster care.

In talking to four girls taken from their mother because of abuse, CASA Cindy Presley learned they had faint memories of a caring father. With the mother's parental rights terminated and the girls destined for different group homes, Presley set out to find the missing father.

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It wasn't easy because the mother had kept moving the kids, and the father had never legally acknowledged them. After relentless sleuthing, Presley traced the dad, got him to legally acknowledge his daughters and reunited a family that's still thriving two years later.

While a CASA volunteer typically handles no more than three cases, a social worker carries as many as 40. Appearing in court for a single case or taking a child to a therapy appointment can eat up most of a social worker's day, leaving her little time for her other 39 cases.

Consider the hours Presley saved the social worker when she volunteered to oversee three little girls taken from their teenage mother. Over two days, Presley traveled to schools in different ends of the county to review academic records. She talked to teachers and then went to Grady Memorial Hospital to examine medical records. And she visited the mom to discuss her progress in court-ordered anger management and parenting classes.

In Fulton County Juvenile Court last week, Davis waited almost four hours to present her report at a hearing that lasted seven minutes. She was representing five siblings under the age of 7 who had been taken from their mother because of criminal allegations of abuse.

As she waited, Davis sat with the mother and grandmother, who now has custody of the children. In her year on the case, Davis has come to know every generation of the family.

Because the pay is so low and the caseloads so high, social workers don't stay long with DFCS. This case has gone through eight social workers. As a result, the family sees Davis as the lone constant in a sea of changing faces. The night before the hearing, the mother called Davis at 11:15. On the day of the hearing, the grandmother phoned her at 6:45 a.m.

From the day Davis took the case, she's been available to the family and acted as peacemaker between grandmother and mother. She realized early on that it was essential that the women get along so the children would be assured continued contact with their mom.

When handed a case, Davis goes into overdrive for two weeks, collecting information and interviewing people. But, on average, she devotes 15 to 25 hours a week to her three cases.

"If you have the time to go out to dinner, you have time to talk to a kid," she says. "You are free to choose to take cases that require a lot less time. And you can always take one case instead of three."

CASA needs hundreds more volunteers to serve all the children in Georgia's beleaguered child welfare system.

"I'd ask people to look inside themselves and see whether they can make a space to do this," says Davis. "I know that I can't make things perfect for every child, but if I can help one child, I would have been successful."

HOW YOU CAN HELP

To find out about becoming a CASA, call 404-874-2888 in metro Atlanta or 1-800-251-4012 if you are outside the metro area. Online. go to

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