

## Child advocacy increasingly needed



Stanczykiewicz (February 5, 2007)

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A serious problem is rising for vulnerable Hoosier children, but so is the opportunity to help.

The child abuse and neglect rate in Indiana has increased to 15.6 confirmed cases per 1,000 children younger than the age of 18 -- a 24 percent increase over the previous year. In a majority of cases, parents are the perpetrators, meaning most of the victimized children are not able to rely on their primary caregivers as the case goes to court.

In response, Indiana law requires that all abused and neglected children have an adult to represent their interests in court and in the child welfare system. While professional attorneys can provide this assistance, everyday citizens can volunteer as a Court Appointed Special Advocate.

In addition to representing children who have been abused or neglected, CASAs can be involved in proceedings that resolve custody, establish paternity and determine parental rights. The volunteer gathers information about the child and the case, drafts written recommendations in the best interest of the child, and then advocates for the child in court proceedings and other meetings within the child welfare system.

The CASA then keeps the child informed of all decisions and developments, monitors the implementation of court orders and case plans, and informs the court of any new information regarding the child.

According to the National CASA Association, about 80 percent of CASA recommendations are approved by local judges and child welfare officials. As a result, cases involving a CASA are more likely to reach a permanent resolution. More services are provided to children and their parents and children with a CASA spend less time in long-term foster care.

Brian Kasper had been in and out of Indiana's child welfare system for most of his 14 years of life when he was assigned a CASA. "After he was assigned to my case and came to the first court hearing, finally my voice was being heard," Kasper said. "There was someone to advocate for me and be very adamant about what was important to me and what I needed."

Kasper credits his CASA for helping him graduate from high school and attend Purdue University. "That simple advocacy can truly change a kid's life and turn them around and make a better person."

In 2009, Indiana CASAs provided more than 500,000 volunteer hours to nearly 17,000 children in the state's child welfare system. However, in 2010 there was a waiting list of 4,544 children in need of a CASA volunteer.

Think about that: abused and neglected ... and on a waiting list.

CASAs must be at least 21 years old, pass a criminal background check and participate in a pre-screening interview. New volunteers receive 30 hours of training and commit to stay involved for at least one full case, which could take 12 to 18 months. Importantly, special expertise or academic credentials are not necessary.

"Having the heart to care, having the heart to set aside yourself for someone else's benefits, that is what it takes," said Ebony Chew, who was assisted by a CASA in Evansville, Ind., after becoming a teen mom. "Everything else can be taught."

Including safety. According to Leslie Rogers Dunn, who oversees the state's CASA program through her staff position with the Indiana Supreme Court, CASAs are trained on how to remain safe in the midst of difficult family situations. CASAs can be partnered with a professional staff member from the child welfare system and meetings with family members can be held in neutral locations. "In the worst-case scenarios the CASA never meets with the parents face-to-face," Rogers explained.

Frank West, a CASA volunteer in Grant County, said his initial concern and nervousness during his first case quickly subsided as he addressed the child's needs. "If it hurts your heart when you hear about a kid being abused, you could be a CASA," West said. "If you've got four or six hours a month to spare, you could be a CASA. And if you want to see that your community, your town, could be a better place, you could be a CASA."

The state of Indiana has certified CASA programs in 70 of the state's 92 counties. Find a link listing the CASA program near you: <http://www.in.gov/judiciary/galcasa>. The problem is increasing, but so is the opportunity to help.

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