

Powerless Children Need Powerful Friends

CASA of DuPage in Wheaton has been serving neglected children for the past two decades.

*by Sharon S. Mulder
Community contributor*

Every child has a right to a safe, permanent, nurturing home. For 20 years, that's been the vision of CASA of DuPage, advocates for abused, neglected and dependent children in the DuPage County Juvenile Court System.

CASA, an acronym for Court Appointed Special Advocates, is a privately-funded nonprofit organization of trained volunteer advocates. These CASA's monitor court cases of innocent children, from birth to 21 years of age, who enter the legal system through no fault of their own.

How CASA Works

When an abused, abandoned or neglected child is removed from a home, a CASA member is assigned by the court to serve as a volunteer advocate for that child's interests. The ultimate goal is to find the permanent solution for the child, hopefully a return home, in as short a time as possible. Sometimes, however, a child may receive permanent guardianship, be adopted or become independent. Cases vary in length of time but normally

last between 18 months and three years.

Each CASA works independently from a social service system, such as the Department of Child and Family Services in order to focus solely on the welfare of a child. Considered the "eyes and ears" of the judge assigned to the case, the advocate visits with the child, observes parent/child visitations and gathers firsthand information regarding the child's situation and needs. The CASA communicates with people relevant to the case, such as parents, relatives, foster parents, social workers, school and medical personnel, and reviews all records and reports submitted to the court. Every court hearing and meeting regarding the child is attended by the child's CASA.

Such one-on-one attention helps the advocate understand the child's life, foster placement, family stress, medical ailments and educational needs. Each month CASA includes this information in an objective, fact-based written report to assist the judge in making educated decisions about each child's needs.

"CASA court reports contain vitally important information about the needs and best interests of the children," Robert J. Anderson, Presiding Judge of the Domestic Relations Division in DuPage County. "The information supplied to our judges by CASA advocates has been instrumental in expediting permanency decisions and ensure that the interests of these hurting children are kept at the forefront in juvenile abuse proceedings."

Advocate Stories

Lisa Drake, CASA of DuPage Executive Director, explains, "It's been shown that children who suffer abuse or neglect are more likely to become juvenile delinquents and violent crimi-

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A new class of advocates completed 35 hours of pre-service training and were sworn in as a "Friend of the Court" this past March.

Photo courtesy of Karen Patton



The CASA logo is a registered trademark and shows a figure holding a heart to symbolize an advocate and child relationship.

Photo courtesy of Karen Patton



CASA advocates meet with their child once per month and summarize their observations in their CASA reports to the court..

Photo courtesy of Karen Patton



Pinwheels are planted in the CASA Children's Garden each April during Child Abuse Prevention Month to honor the children who died from abuse. Photo courtesy of Karen Patton

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nals as adults. A major factor in avoiding these outcomes is the presence of a consistent, concerned adult in each child's life. For DuPage children, a CASA can be that adult. In addition, children assigned to CASA are more likely to experience fewer foster placements and receive more services to benefit them and their families."

Since becoming a CASA advocate 12 years ago, Karen has represented seven children of varying ages. Her longest case involved an 11-year-old girl and her two younger brothers, a

divorced father who left the country and an abusive mother who blamed her daughter for the family break up. After mustering the courage to call 911, the girl and her brothers were placed in separate foster homes since the father never responded to agency calls or letters.

After two years the boys returned home to their mother however their sister wanted to remain in her foster home. When the girl turned 15, the court was able to permanently honor that decision and her foster parents became her legal guardians.

During Karen's four years with this case, everyone else involved with the children changed – foster parents, schools, towns, therapists, caseworkers, agency representatives, lawyers and even the judge. Karen was the one constant who made sure the voices of the children were always heard. Today, she reports, the girl is a high school honor roll student who has college plans to become a teacher or a social worker.

Another CASA, Gene, currently works on a case involving a neglected 7-year-old boy who also has an absent father. When the boy and his sisters were taken into protective custody, their grandfather also was removed for beating their mother. Because drug addiction had left this young mom unable to maintain a safe family home, the girls went to foster homes while the boy went into the hospital with chronic medical issues.

Long hospital stays, interspersed with short-term foster homes and sporadic home visits, have left this little boy longing for the day he will live at home with his mother and sisters again. Gene continues watching over the children to make sure

Hours that advocates spent on kids.

6,000

CASA's spent about 6,000 hours doing various things like attending court, visiting children and writing case reviews.



Judge Robert Anderson of the 18th Judicial Court swears in a new class of advocates. Approximately 35 new advocates are sworn in each year. Photo courtesy of Karen Patton

they have the chance for such a happy ending.

CASA in the Community

To help draw attention to the issue of child abuse and neglect in DuPage County, CASA of DuPage publicizes National Child Abuse Prevention Month every April. A Hands Around the Courthouse ceremony provides a powerful tribute to each child who died in Illinois that year due to abuse or neglect. In 2013, to mark its 20 years of service, CASA opened a new Children's Garden on the Wheaton campus of the County Judicial Complex. Conceived and led by Eagle Scout Daniel Weber, this is a permanent place where lost children are remembered and others can find hope for a brighter future.

That theme – Hope For A Brighter Future – is found throughout CASA of DuPage. Former CASA foster child Pamela Butler sums it up best when she says, "To give a child a CASA is to give them a voice. To give them a voice is to give them hope, and to give them hope is to give them the world. I believe that with all my heart."

To learn more about the organization, visit dupagecasa.com or call 630-221-0889.



Two Decades of CASA

CASA has helped thousands and grown an immense amount since opening its doors in 1993.

CASA of DuPage, started in 1993 with 14 advocates and 15 court cases. Today CASA of DuPage serves 258 children via 128 advocate volunteers and an advocate supervisor staff of four. Last year DuPage CASA's spent approximately 6,000 hours, and drove over 44,000 miles, visiting their assigned children, attending court, family meetings and case reviews.

Throughout the nation, most judges must choose which children will, and will not, have advocates. CASA of DuPage stands out as one of only a handful of chapters able to serve 100 percent of the abused and neglected children in its juvenile court system. That's because one-on-one advocacy is provided at no cost to taxpayers or the families involved and CASA of DuPage is entirely self-supported through fundraising efforts.

It costs approximately \$1,500 for a child in DuPage County to have an advocate for one year. Over the past 20 years, more than 400 locally-trained advocates have served over 1,450 DuPage children and youth. In addition to grants and private/corporate donations, 20 area service clubs offer ongoing support. CASA also raises money through two highly successful annual fundraising events: the spring CASA Superheroes Golf Outing and the Champions of Hope Gala in the fall.



When CASA began 20 years ago, it had 14 advocates working on 15 court cases. Today, CASA of DuPage has 128 advocates serve 258 children.

Photo courtesy of Karen Patton