

## CASA program gives a voice to neglected and abused children

BY TIM PUET

Reporter, Catholic Times

When the legal system intervenes on behalf of a neglected or abused child, plenty of people become involved – judges, lawyers, law enforcement officers, social workers, physicians, and others. What is often missing is someone who can provide a voice for the child and has the time to focus on the specific concerns of an individual situation.

Volunteers in a program known as CASA – Court Appointed Special Advocates – can provide that added dimension. Their sole purpose is to serve as what is legally known as a guardian *ad litem* – someone appointed by an Ohio county's domestic relations or juvenile court to act in a child's best interests once it has been alleged that the child is neglected or abused.

"Rule 48 of the Ohio Supreme Court requires a guardian *ad litem* in neglect and abuse cases," said Kathy Kerr, executive director of Franklin County's CASA program. "That person serves as an officer of the domestic relations or juvenile court but does not need to be an attorney.

Attorneys serving in this role may be doing it for numerous children and may not have the time needed to devote attention to each one. CASA advocates concentrate on only one case (or two, in exceptional circumstances) at a time. These are usually the most challenging cases – the ones most likely to need someone who can spend a significant period of time with a child in order to see what is needed. All the cases involve children who are under the protective



services of Franklin County Children Services (FCCS).

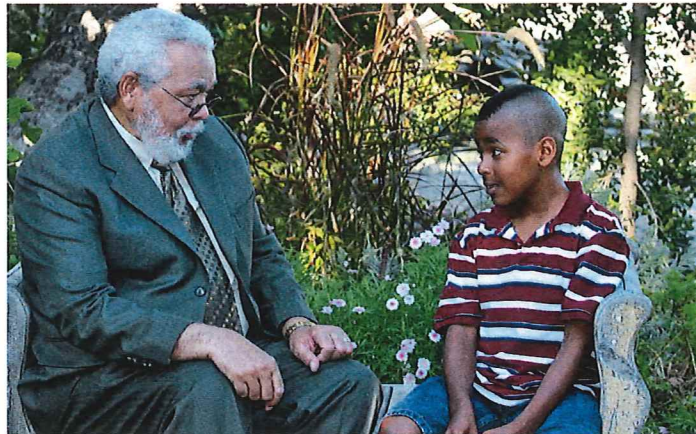
"Just having one consistent adult in their lives is so important to some children," Kerr said. "They've had so many adults come in and out of their lives that it's hard to trust anyone. We promise that we're going to be there for them, and we keep that promise.

"We had one case that involved a six-year-old girl who was sexually abused while in foster care. The girl didn't say much during the advocate's first three monthly visits, but at the end of the third visit, she walked to the door with the advocate and said, 'I'm being hurt.' She was being abused by a boy in that foster home. This could have gone on for months if the advocate had not established trust with that little girl just by coming back each month. The girl was immediately removed from that home. This is one example, but we've had many similar ones. Nobody messes with your kid once you're a guardian."

Advocates must be at least 21 and are requested to make a two-year commitment. They undergo 32 hours of training online and in a classroom before being sworn in by the court and assigned their first case. Advocates must also receive 12 hours of in-service training per year.

Once assigned, an advocate visits the child (or children) at least once a month, wherever they may be, talking with them and others close to them to determine whether they are receiving adequate care and to guarantee that their wishes are shared with the court.

"Advocates are not Big Brothers or Big



A volunteer from the Court Appointed Special Advocates program visits a child. CASA volunteers are appointed by a court to act in a child's best interest in alleged abuse cases.

Sisters," Kerr said. "We're not mentors, but court-appointed guardians *ad litem*. Our rules do not allow us to transport children off the property where they live. We have to see them in the setting where they are."

Every six months, the advocate takes part in a review of the case, along with the current caregivers, family members, lawyers, representatives of FCCS, and other service providers. "Our advocates are pulled into a bigger team, but we're there only for the child," Kerr said.

The advocate also participates in court hearings. "During a hearing, the opinions of people representing the government are often on one side with the parents or caregivers on the other, conflicting about the child's welfare," Kerr said. "That's when the magistrate will look an advo-

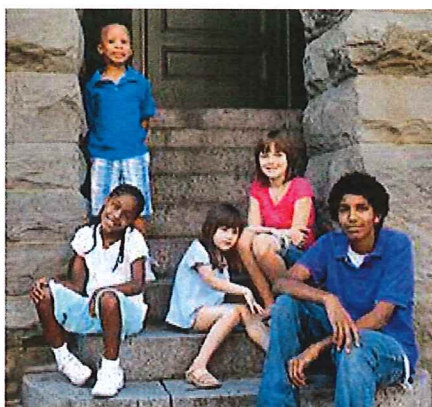
cate in the eye and ask, 'What do you think?' and everyone must listen. They realize the advocate knows the child well because of the monthly visits and because the advocate's only vested interest is in what's best for the child.

"Sometimes the response is, 'I think this child can go on unsupervised visits to the family,' or 'He's doing well in foster care.' Other times, it may be 'I'm a little worried.' The magistrate has the final say, but what the advocate says often plays a big role in whatever decision is made."

"I have tremendous admiration for the ability of advocates to make appropriate assessments of a child's situation," said Marla Holben, a magistrate since 2015. Holben has been involved with juvenile cases for more than 25 years, first working as a public defender and then as counsel for FCCS. While a public defender, she also served as a guardian *ad litem* in an experimental program.

"It's a remarkable experience to see these people from all walks of life come in and be a voice for the child," Holben said. "Their information has a great impact on the decisions I make as a magistrate because I know they've taken the time needed to thoroughly look at what's affecting a case."

Magistrates are appointed judicial officers who perform many of the same functions as judges in Ohio. They have the same authority as a judge, but only conduct jury trials if the parties agree. Most court cases involving anyone under 18 in Franklin County are handled



CASA volunteers are 21 and older and can work with one child or a group of siblings, but concentrate on one (or sometimes two) cases at a time, allowing them to take a thorough look at the needs of the children they serve. Photos courtesy Franklin County CASA

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from start to finish by a magistrate. If anyone objects to the magistrate's decision, the case goes to the judge who assigned it.

Many neglect and abuse cases involve families dealing with substance abuse or mental health issues. Unfortunately, Kerr said, many children are placed into foster care, and most remain there for 18 to 24 months. "Everybody hopes that children get back with their families," she said. "That's usually the case, but not always."

An advocate stays with a child until a safe, permanent home has been found and the case has closed. Occasionally, someone is assigned as an advocate soon after a child's birth. For example, "in cases where a child is born to a heroin-addicted mother, the first contact can be while the child is still in a hospital's maternity unit," Kerr said.

In a situation such as that one, the child theoretically could have an advocate from birth until 18, the age of legal adulthood. Kerr said she has never heard of such an instance. But Joanne Sheely, who has been an advocate since the program began in Franklin County,

said she worked with one young woman for more than 10 years.

"She was in and out of the system," Sheely said. "She was with her mother, then her father, then a guardian, then her mother, but she always had me in her life as a constant. I remember when she was 14 or 15, I saw her in the courthouse and she said, 'I knew you'd show up,' and that meant so much.

"I fought to keep her in the system, and we stayed in touch, which generally doesn't happen once a child has found a stable home. Now she's in her mid-20s and married.

"I went to her wedding and have seen her and her husband since then, and it appears they have a good relationship. Being an advocate has given me a lot of satisfaction because I know I've had a role in good outcomes like this."

There are nearly 1,000 CASA programs in 49 states and the District of Columbia. They exist in 44 of Ohio's 88 counties, including Franklin, Union, Delaware, Pickaway, and Perry counties in the Diocese of Columbus. CASA began in Seattle in 1977 and has been part of the Franklin County court sys-

tem since 1991.

Kerr said research done on CASA programs nationally shows that children who have a CASA advocate as their guardian *ad litem* spend less time going from one foster home to another, are more likely to perform better in school and to be placed with their siblings, and are more likely to be adopted by a loving family than children without such an advocate.

According to Kerr, CASA in Franklin County has 13 staff members and about 240 volunteers who worked with 826 abused or neglected children in 2016. The latter number represents about one-third of the 2,700 abused, neglected, and dependent children who came through the county's juvenile court system.

"We're always in need of more volunteers, particularly more men and minorities," she said. "About three-fourths of our volunteers are women. We trained 95 people last year and would love to have another 95 or 100 more this year. Many of our volunteers have a passion to help young people. They often tell us that they'd never heard of CASA, and that learning about what we do was an awakening for them."

Training for advocates takes place in the winter, spring, and fall. The spring course begins online on Monday, May 8, with classroom sessions on four Saturdays: from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. on May 13, May 20, and June 3 and from 1 to



4 p.m. on June 10. A swearing-in ceremony for those who complete the training will take place Thursday, June 29. There is still time for interested parties to sign up.

There are other ways to get involved. CASA of Franklin County has a budget of about \$1 million per year, with about half of those funds coming from the federal, state, and county governments and the other half consisting of corporate and foundation grants and private donations.

CASA of Franklin County is sponsoring a fundraising art show and auction that will feature art created by young people to benefit abused and neglected children from 6 to 9 p.m. Friday, May 5, at Clarus Partners, 1233 Dublin Road, Columbus. Admission is \$50 per person. The organization also is sponsoring a free fundraising breakfast on Friday, Sept. 15.

For more information about CASA of Franklin County, visit [www.casacolumbus.org](http://www.casacolumbus.org) or call (614) 525-7450.



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