

# News & Updates from the Cumberland County CASA Program

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## Spotlight on CASA Volunteer Peter Adams



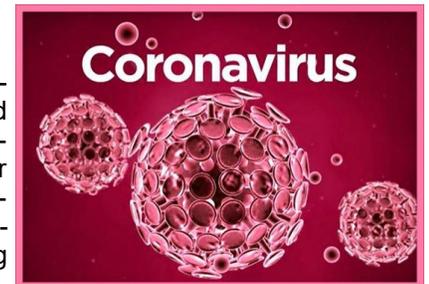
CASA Volunteer  
Peter Adams

Peter Adams has been a CASA Volunteer for almost 5 years. He obtained a B.A. from the State University of New York at Stony Brook and a Master's Degree in Public Administration from UCLA. Peter worked with children who had been previously housed with minimal services by New York State after being determined to be developmentally delayed and/or having behavioral health problems. He observed the effects of institutionalization on these children. This motivated him to enroll in a graduate program in preventive medicine and administrative sciences at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. During his time there, Peter had the opportunity to work on several grants and contracts for one of his professors. One contract resulted in Peter leading the re-procurement of the Medicaid fiscal intermediary contracts for Wisconsin and becoming acting Chief of Operations for Wisconsin Medicaid. After receiving his Master's degree in Industrial Engineering, he found a job with Mayo Clinic as a health system engineer. During the next 35 years, Peter also worked as a senior manager for health systems and health insurers, and as a political appointee/senior government official in Pennsylvania under Governors Casey, Rendell and Corbett. As a retiree, he provided (before COVID-19) substantial childcare to his 7 grandchildren who currently live in Pittsburgh, Toledo and Baltimore.

He also now has the luxury of doing volunteer work that interests him, such as doing tax return preparation for low-income, elderly, and otherwise disadvantaged people as an AARP volunteer and being an advocate for children and youth as a CASA volunteer. Peter was sworn in as a CASA volunteer in the fall of 2015. Since then, he has advocated for four children in four different families. Thank you, Peter, for your tireless work to help and advocate for your CASA kids!

## Far-Reaching Effects of COVID-19 through the CASA Lens

The entire world has been impacted by COVID-19 in ways no one could ever have predicted. Deaths caused by the Coronavirus, and how those premature deaths have impacted families and communities, are unimaginable. The fear of dying or being impacted significantly to the point of being unable to maintain employment, housing, or to care for your family are equally unimaginable. Being forced to leave a job, and subsequently being unable to pay for basic survival expenses--also unimaginable. But there are also heart-breaking repercussions that impact dependent children that we have to memorialize during this unprecedented time.



We are seeing dependent children who desperately need to be placed into various homes or facilities, who are literally in limbo because the anticipated homes or facilities were not accepting new clients during the pandemic. There is no forward movement for them.

In some cases, the pandemic has forced premature decisions about children's placements, taking out the opportunity to gradually increase visitations, whether it is a return home to a parent or to provide the opportunity for a child to acclimate to a new placement before the transition is finalized. To be clear, there is no guarantee children will be able to successfully transfer from one placement to another in the best of circumstances; taking "gradual" out of the equation because of COVID does not help matters.

We have seen a number of children lose their placements in, otherwise, very stable homes. With many foster parents suddenly finding themselves having to work from home, and having a foster child who no longer has any outlet—no school to go to, no respite (encouraged in order to give foster parents a short break), no visits with family—some foster families are simply unable to provide the level of care the child needs—sometimes 24/7—and manage their own lives, and they are forced to give their notice for the child's removal.

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We have seen several of our CASA children requiring inpatient psychiatric hospitalizations. There is no way to know how much blame we can place on the pandemic, but with the lack of routine—not being able to have in-person contact with their parents and family, not being in school, not seeing friends, not having outside activities, not having face-to-face mental health services--and the general angst COVID-19 causes for children who already often suffer from trauma, grief and loss, there is every likelihood that the pandemic could be at the root of the unraveling of their mental health.



It is also reported through the Pennsylvania Attorney General's office that ChildLine (the statewide child abuse/neglect reporting hotline) referrals dropped by 50% in the early parts of the shut-down, with no school officials, medical workers or social workers in a position to lay eyes on the children they often would see. There is no way to know what is happening in the homes of at-risk children when no outside eyes are upon them.

These are very scary times, and while we laud the efforts of CYS caseworkers and service providers to do the best they can in the midst of various restrictions brought about by the pandemic, we also continue to be in awe of our CASA Volunteers who did, and continue to do, everything they can to establish contact, in one way or another, with their CASA children, checking in to see if any services have lapsed so they can communicate their children's needs with the Children & Youth Services caseworkers, service providers, and/or the child's Guardian ad litem to ensure services can get back on track again as soon as possible. In times like this, we realize CASA Volunteers are more desperately needed than ever!

There are some silver linings that should also be noted. Most hearings in March and April 2020 were continued. Because of the pandemic, Cumberland County and its IT department rose to the occasion to ensure that video conferencing was available and the Courts were able to re-schedule most of the continued hearings, plus the already-scheduled ones, via video-conference once Courts were able to fully be back in session in May.

In the CASA Office, we learned that we can easily abide by the social distancing requirements since working remotely has become an acceptable alternative to being physically in the office. Again, thanks to how efficiently the County and its IT department have always been run, we had the laptops, software and technology needed to operate at full capacity from home right from the start of the pandemic.

CASA training, which is offered two times a year, was just a few sessions in for the spring 2020 session when the pandemic struck. CASA Program Outreach Coordinator, Virginia Koser, was able to merge technology platforms provided by National CASA (which provides our training curriculum) and Cumberland County to successfully complete training virtually. For the first time in Cumberland County, our annual Light of Hope Ceremony was unable to be held in the spring, but this training class of 5 was very honored to be sworn in during a ceremony in July with all three Dependency Judges- Christylee Peck, Edward Guido, and Thomas Placey- even if socially distanced, and without an audience.

What has become blatantly obvious as we continue through this pandemic, which seems to have no end in sight, is that now, more than ever, we need "ordinary citizens" interested in learning more about becoming a CASA Volunteer. Our community's children need you to let their voices be heard! Please see the back page to find out more about our next CASA training opportunity! Or email the CASA office at [casa@ccpa.net](mailto:casa@ccpa.net) for more information.

[In the wake of COVID-19 and while children are less exposed to outside sources, take note of a resource children can use on their phones in the event of safety concerns for themselves or others. Download the app: safe2say Something or visit the Website: <https://www.safe2saypa.org/>. Also, if you have any concerns regarding the safety of any child, please contact Child-Line immediately: 1-800-932-0313]



### **Cumberland County CASA Program Statistics: March 2001– June 2020**

- ◆ 250 CASA volunteers have been sworn-in (37 currently representing 56 children; over 100 continuing in a supportive role)
- ◆ 524 dependent children have been advocated for, and many have received CASA assisted Educational Advocacy
- ◆ 1,861 CASA Reports have been written since 2001, providing additional information to help the Court make decisions

Out of the 524 children represented by CASA volunteers, some of the outcomes have resulted in: 164 children returning home, 50 children living with a permanent legal custodian, 203 children being adopted, 31 children aging out of the system, 1 child dying of natural causes, and 5 children having their cases transferred to other jurisdictions.

## Thirty-Ninth Class of CASA Volunteers– Spring 2020

**Brenda Bailey** grew up in a small coal mining town in western Pennsylvania. She relocated after graduating from college and has lived in Mechanicsburg for the past 32 years. Family has always been her first priority, and she is very proud of her two adult sons who have also chosen to remain in this area.



Our first ever socially distanced class picture! Our Spring 2020 Training Class after their swearing in on July 13, 2020 (left to right): Kim Pirtle, Elizabeth Walker, Craig Jurgensen, and Brenda Bailey. Not pictured: Courtney Christine

Brenda has been with the Federal Aviation Administration for 30 years, and she was fortunate to advance over the years from a computer specialist to her current position as a project manager. She has also had the opportunity to participate as a union and EEO representative, protecting the rights of FAA employees. Now that her children are grown and independent, she feels compelled to offer support to others in need. She is thankful for the opportunity to become a CASA volunteer and anxious to get started with advocating for a child.

**Courtney Christine** is a Messiah College graduate of 2016. She studied Chinese and International Business and lived in China for a semester of her senior year of college, where she truly fell in love with the culture and the people. She is currently employed at Candoris Technologies in Annville, Pennsylvania as an IT Data Center Project Manager and Customer Success Manager for their Managed Services Department. In her free time, she enjoys spending time training her horses, hiking with her dog, spending time with her girlfriend and friends, and traveling within and out of the country.

**J. Craig Jurgensen** was born in Trenton, New Jersey. He attended Rutgers University and graduated with a BA in Biological Sciences in 1962. He then attended New York Medical College in NYC, graduating with an M.D. in 1966. He completed specialty training in Internal Medicine, Neurology, and Sleep Medicine. He also served in the US Army in the Medical Corps from 1970-'72. He practiced clinical neurology in Carlisle from 1972 until his retirement in 2010. He and his wife, Joan, were married for 54 years. Together they raised three children, all of whom are married and raising families of their own. He has four grandchildren. His wife passed away in 2017 from Alzheimer's disease.

Craig has been active all through his life in music – including with the church choir and playing piano, guitar, and the ukulele. He currently teaches music. His community activities include: the Central Pennsylvania Clean Air Board, the St. John's Preschool Board, the Carlisle Musical Arts Club, and the Cantate Carlisle Board. He has also been a member of St. John's Episcopal Church for 40+ years where he practices his faith and applies it to his everyday life.

**Elizabeth Walker** is a Maryland girl who graduated from Messiah College and planted new roots in Pennsylvania. A former non-profit director of marketing, she has been a freelance writer, editor, and marketer since 1997. She loves learning from other people's life experiences and the best part of her work is being able to share stories of hope and truth. Elizabeth first learned about CASA more than 20 years ago, but the time to join this good work was never quite right until 2020. She's excited to begin working with Cumberland County CASA and making a difference in the lives of children and their families. Volunteering has been a fundamental part of Elizabeth's life and she has enjoyed her past work with New Hope Ministries, Hershey Food Bank & Community Outreach, and in various roles at church. Elizabeth and her husband, Brian, recently returned to Mechanicsburg after 11 years of living in Hershey. They are grateful to be closer to their parents, children, and grandchildren. An avid reader for as long as she can remember, Elizabeth enjoys escaping the demands of real life by diving into a good book.

**Kim Pirtle** grew up in nearby Berks County and currently resides with her husband, Jim, in Monroe Township. They previously lived in Atlanta, GA and moved back to the area so that the family would be able to spend time with their great-grandparents, grandparents and other relatives. Kim worked for 33+ years for a company as a computer programmer, business analyst, and project manager for large computer systems. She is happily unemployed at this time. Jim is a high school Math teacher for Lower Dauphin School District. Both of their children got married in 2019 (on back-to-back Saturdays), and so there are now even more family members to love! They all live in Pennsylvania and the family is always working out ways to all get together to enjoy each other's company (and usually food too). Kim loves to be outside - sitting on a deck, gardening, watching the birds or other animals, hiking, kayaking, or any other type of outdoor adventure. Kim is looking forward to being the best advocate that she can be for an at-risk child (or sibling group).



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Find us on Facebook  Cumberland County PA, CASA Program



**Upcoming Training Dates:  
September through October 2020**

Contact the CASA Office to explore becoming an advocate for child victims of abuse and/or neglect at 717-240-6159 or [casa@ccpa.net](mailto:casa@ccpa.net). For more information, see [www.ccpa.net/casa](http://www.ccpa.net/casa).

Training is held in Carlisle –in the spring and in the fall.

- Volunteer advocates must—
- be 21 years of age or older,
  - be able to successfully pass criminal checks,
  - complete 50 hours of training, and
  - be willing to make at least a 2-year commitment.

**The mission** of the Cumberland County Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Program is to assist the court in determining what is in the best interest of abused and/or neglected children whose cases are in the court system. Through objective investigation and observation with the focus on the child assigned, trained CASA volunteers develop and present their recommendations to the court to aid in establishing a safe, permanent and nurturing home in an expeditious manner.