

News & Updates from the Cumberland County CASA Program

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Thanks a Latte



The theme for the Fall 2011 Annual Volunteer Appreciation Brunch was Thanks a Latte—expressing appreciation for all that the CASA volunteers do throughout the year. It was once again held at The Depot at Dickinson College, hosted by the Kappa Alpha Theta sorority women who presented each person attending with a gift bag of coffees and teas. After enjoying a light brunch, the newest class of CASA volunteers was sworn-in by Judge Edward Guido and congratulated by Judge Al Masland and Jim Flower, Dependency Hearing Officer. Veteran volunteers shared things they were thankful for because of their involvement with the CASA Program. Their stories made everyone laugh and cry, as they recalled both funny and touching moments in their lives and the lives of the children they represented.



The Thetas made such an abundance of gift bags that in the week following the brunch, the staff at Cumberland County Children and Youth Services also each received one as a token of appreciation for what they do for the dependent children in their care.

Judges Masland and Guido listening to CASA volunteers share their stories.

The Twenty-third Corps of CASA Volunteers



Sworn-in at the Appreciation Brunch were Barb Willis, Kathy Young, Susan Kalmar, and Addie Bitzer. Jean Squires was sworn-in separately on November 28.

Addie Bitzer has spent most of her life living in Mechanicsburg, but currently, she resides in Camp Hill. She is a full-time student at Shippensburg University where she is part of a 2-year cohort program working toward her Bachelor's degree in Social Work. She hopes the CASA Volunteer program will help provide her with much needed experience as she plans to eventually work in child welfare in some capacity. Additionally, Addie works part-time as a Marketing Assistant for Cleveland Brothers. Before attending Shippensburg, she was a modern dance major at Slippery Rock University. She still loves modern dance, but solely as a hobby now. Addie also enjoys yoga and does a work/trade at a local yoga studio.

Susan Kalmar, a native of Southern California, arrived in Carlisle, PA by way of the U.S. Navy. Of all her jobs, raising her children and watching them follow their passions has been the most rewarding. She believes all children deserve the opportunity to be safe and secure so that they can discover their passions. Susan wants to advocate for that hope.

Jean Squires grew up in Connecticut and currently lives in the St. Thomas area outside of Chambersburg. She is employed fulltime as a teacher, has been a foster parent, adopted 3 children, and is currently completing a doctorate in Teacher Leadership.

Cari Suarez was born and raised in New York City, moving to Pennsylvania in 2005. She has one son and a beautiful grandson. Currently she is taking classes toward a degree in respiratory therapy. Cari is already a CASA volunteer in Washington County, Maryland and is waiting to be sworn-in in Cumberland County until that appointment closes.

Barbara Willis moved to the Harrisburg area from Texas in the past 2 years and has found PA to be a place of much beauty and history. She is an avid reader who also loves singing, music and animals and enjoys the outdoors. Children hold a special place in her heart and she loves to bless others. She enjoys being around people and spending time with family and friends. Other interests include dancing, writing poems, watching movies, and barbecue. Both she and her husband are disciples of their Lord Jesus Christ.

Kathy Young was born in El Paso, TX. As the daughter of an Army officer, she and her family moved to Ansbach, Germany, where she attended elementary school. When her father retired from the military, the family relocated to Rockton, PA. She moved to the Carlisle area in 1996. Kathy is married and has 3 children – Willow (7), Sawyer (5), and Gavin (2). They are the joy of her life, and inspire her every day to strive to be a better person. Kathy's family attends the Carlisle Brethren in Christ Church where she is very involved in the children's ministry and Wednesday night Girls' Bible Club. She also attends WOW (Women of the Word), a multigenerational Bible study. In her spare time, Kathy enjoys running, reading, gardening, music, soccer, and just being outdoors. She graduated in December 2011 from Central Penn College with a Bachelor of Science degree in Criminal Justice.

Expanding Services for Children and Families in Cumberland County

For the past several years, the Cumberland County CASA Program has been involved with the convergence of many new initiatives to support children and families involved with Children & Youth Services, with the goals “to protect children, promote strong families, promote child well-being, and provide timely permanency.” The Supreme Court of PA catapulted these initiatives into action by establishing the *Office of Children and Families in the Courts*, which in turn, outlined the *Permanency Practice Initiatives*, which have had far reaching implications for children who are dependent in Cumberland County.

Many new programs and policies have been established and existing ones strengthened, including, but not limited to:

- *Family Finding* is a process used by Children and Youth Services to help provide the opportunity for youth to identify and establish life-long connections to family members or those adults that children have previously had a positive connection to in the community. Family Finding adheres to and respects the child’s and family’s cultural, racial, ethnic, and community bonds that the child identifies with, to promote well-being, safety, and permanency for youths at risk for placement outside of their homes or who are currently in placement. CASA volunteer, Sandy Evans, has been trained in Family Finding and has assisted in some of these searches.
- *Family Group Decision Making* is another process that is well utilized in Cumberland County. Family members and other life connections are brought together with a trained facilitator to help the family in crisis find the support and resources they need. The family works together to address the concerns, and based on the strengths of the family and other resources available, they develop a plan that addresses the protection and safety of the child(ren). CASA volunteers are often invited to participate in these meetings.
- *Judicial Conferences* serve as interim meetings for parents with the hearing officer, attorneys, caseworker, and CASA volunteer (when assigned) between regularly scheduled Permanency Review hearings. These informal conferences are meant to help parents understand and accomplish their goals in a timely fashion.
- *Family Development Credentialing* focuses on ensuring all service providers have the skills and competencies they need to empower families to attain a healthy self-reliance and interdependence within their communities. FDC offers quality, sequential training enabling workers to develop these skills and competencies, and provides a credential recognized throughout the country. Recently, CASA Office Coordinator, Pam Wysocki, successfully completed the 80-hour program.

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (2008) is the federal legislation behind many of the changes implemented, and also speaks to the importance of maintaining sibling ties, addressing educational needs, and improving outcomes for older youth in foster care. For more details about addressing educational needs, see the article on the following page.

For older youth in foster care, new court protocols have been created. Beginning at age 16, youth are now more actively engaged not only in creating their discharge plan (i.e. housing, education, employment plans, etc.), but they also are being prepped to represent their plans to the Court directly. At age 17½, when regulations dictate that a dependent child must have a written discharge-transition plan, the Judge now holds a private judicial meeting with the youth in his courtroom office to review the plan. Other individuals, including the CASA volunteer, may be invited by the youth to attend this meeting as well. The purpose is to impress on the youth the importance of having viable plans for living on their own after leaving care. Also, the Judge, not the Hearing Officer, is now responsible for hearings when a youth wishes to leave “the system” and terminate their involvement with Children and Youth Services once they have legally become an adult. Tremendous efforts are being made to encourage youth to remain dependent as long as possible, until the age of 21, to benefit from all the services and supports that are available to them before they truly graduate into the realities of adulthood. Research has suggested that allowing 3 more years in the supportive environment and with the Court’s oversight, youth are more likely to further their educations, gain more work and life experience, increase the potential for earning higher wages, delay the likelihood of early pregnancies, improve chances of maintaining stable housing, and decrease the rates of incarceration.

KATwalk for CASA

Presented by Kappa Alpha Theta

Tuesday, April 17, 7 to 9 pm

Anita Twinn Schlechter Auditorium

Dickinson College

Tickets available in the Underground

\$3 in advance, \$5 at the door

All proceeds benefit

PA CASA



Educational Advocacy for Children and Youth in Foster Care

By E.J. McKenna-Hieb, CASA Volunteer and Educational Advocate

Educational stability is often an elusive goal for children and youth in foster care. It is not uncommon for youth to move frequently while dependent. Each home move may bring about a corresponding move to a new school. Children not only lose the familiarity of their neighborhood and family members while in foster care, but also suffer the loss of school friends and familiar teachers. Furthermore, research shows, on average, students lose 4-6 months' progress with each educational move. The potential for educational disruption is great for these children who have already suffered abuse or neglect and disruption in their family setting.

Barriers to education are widespread and systemic for children in foster care. In addition to frequent moves, these children may experience loss of records, loss of credits, delay or denial of enrollment, inappropriate placements, placement in segregated settings, lack of special education for children with disabilities, high numbers of suspensions, expulsions, high drop out and low graduation rates. It is estimated that over 40% of students in the foster care system have special education needs. These may range from mild to severe. Sometimes children come into the dependency court system with out-of-date IEPs (Individual Education Plans) or a need to be evaluated for special education.

The problems surrounding the education of children in foster care have been researched and documented by advocates and state and federal officials over the past 30 years. Yet the educational challenges continue to be overwhelming for the children and youth in the care of the child welfare system and for the state and county agencies and the courts who oversee and determine their welfare. The impact of a lack of quality education coupled with the trauma of child abuse can be debilitating. The chance of success for any child denied an appropriate education in today's society is slim. Children and youth denied educational stability often lack the training to support themselves in today's changing economy and may land in the adult welfare system or worse in the criminal justice arena.

In 2008, Congress addressed some of these issues in the *Fostering Connections Act* where it outlined the importance of educational stability. "Research shows that on average each change in school placement for a child results in a loss of 6 months of educational progress. More than one third of children in foster care have experienced four changes in school placements." Congress mandated that children in foster care now have the ability to stay in placement until the age of 21, thus allowing them to finish their education and transition to post secondary/career training. It ordered state child welfare and education agencies to coordinate in order to ensure a continuity of educational services to children in foster care. In addition, Congress designated that each child be appointed an **Education Decision Maker** in the absence of an active parent or guardian. The *Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA)* outlines the need for Special Education Surrogate Parents for children with disabilities who are without parents or guardians.

In 2011, the PA Supreme Court adopted new Juvenile Court Rules related to educational needs of children and youth in the child welfare system. These rules focused on minimizing school changes and ensuring a juvenile child is attending school, receiving educational services and making progress toward graduation. The Rules also ensure that a juvenile has a legally authorized Educational Decision Maker and requires the juvenile court to confirm that a child's health care and disability needs are identified, monitored and addressed and that children with disabilities are receiving recommended accommodations. In 2010 and 2011, both the PA Department of Education and the PA Department of Welfare issued bulletins outlining the fulfillment of these new federal and state requirements for the education of children in foster care.

Court Appointed Special Advocates are designated in the Juvenile Act, Fostering Connections Act, and the PA Juvenile Court Rules as potential Education Decision Makers. This is an adult who may serve as the educational parent for children in regular education who do not have an active parent able to make educational decisions. A caseworker, a foster parent, or a Guardian *ad litem* (GAL) also may serve in this capacity. A *Special Education Decision Maker* or *Surrogate Parent* is an adult who makes all special education decisions related to a child with disabilities. This is the child's parent, or in situations where the parent is not able or active, a person appointed by the school district or a court. Caseworkers or agency staff may NOT be Surrogate Parents or Special Education Decision Makers under the IDEA. The foster parent may act as the Special Education Parent or, if appropriate, a mentor or **CASA** or the child's GAL may be appointed in this role.

Because CASA is a proven program operating under the jurisdiction of the courts in Pennsylvania, it is uniquely positioned to provide quality educational advocacy to fulfill these mandates. In their roles as the 'eyes and ears' of the judge in providing documentation and testimony in dependency hearings, as well as their day-to-day oversight and advocacy for the youth they are court-ordered to represent, CASA volunteers play an important role in the provision of services to these children and can extend that oversight into the area of educational advocacy with appropriate training. At present, many CASAs across the Commonwealth are already filling roles as educational advocates in their day-to-day CASA advocacy.

Cumberland County Juvenile Court Judges have been appointing CASA volunteers as Education Decision Makers or Special Education Decision Makers. The Cumberland County CASA Program currently has two experienced educators who serve as trainers to help CASA volunteers understand and navigate the education requirements which may be challenging. The long-term benefits of educational stability can be tremendous to the future success of these children and youth they represent. Court Appointed Special Advocates will continue to play an important role in the pursuit of educational stability for the children and youth they represent.

Helpful materials related to educational advocacy are available in the Cumberland County CASA office or online at: www.nationalcasa.org, The Education Law Center at www.ELC-PA.org and Pennsylvania's Training and Technical Assistance Network: www.pattan.net.

Program Statistics as of December 31, 2011:

- 149 CASA volunteers have been trained (62 active; 57 CASA Supporters)
- 316 dependent children have been represented, 20 of whom received CASA-appointed educational advocacy since 2007
- 849 CASA Reports have been written, providing additional information to help the Court make decisions

Of the children represented by CASA volunteers whose cases have closed since the CASA Program began, 100 returned home, 128 were adopted, and 26 went to live with a permanent legal custodian or a fit and willing relative. Ten children aged out of the system, 1 child died of natural causes and 2 had their cases transferred to other jurisdictions.

CASA Volunteer Training

FALL TRAINING:

SATURDAYS, 9 TO 4

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2012, DATES TO BE DETERMINED

To explore becoming an advocate for child victims of abuse and/or neglect in Cumberland County, **contact the CASA Office, 240-6159 or casa@ccpa.net**. More information can also be found at www.ccpa.net/casa.

Volunteer advocates must—

- be 21 years of age or older,
- be able to successfully pass criminal checks,
- complete 36-40 hours of training, and
- be willing to make at least a 2-year commitment.

Training is held over 5 weeks in Carlisle on Tuesday and Thursday evenings from 6 to 9 pm in the spring and on 5 Saturdays from 9 am to 4 pm in the fall.

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**Cumberland County
CASA Program**

OUR MISSION. . .

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.



News and Updates from the Cumberland County CASA Program is published semiannually. Back issues are available upon request or at www.ccpa.net/casa. To be added to or removed from the mailing list, contact the CASA Office at (717) 240-6159 or casa@ccpa.net.