

CASA Montana

—Ellen M. Bush, Executive Director, CASA of Montana

—CASA volunteers believe that children deserve every chance to grow up in a safe, nurturing home.

CASA of Montana is looking for volunteers. For more information about the program in your area, contact local CASA programs.

Anaconda GAL Program
3rd Judicial District
(406) 563-7972
Email: dcuny@anacondapca.org
www.anacondagal.org

Yellowstone CASA
13th Judicial District (Havre)
(406) 259-1233
Email: yellowstonecasa@imt.net
www.yellowstonecasa.org

Gallatin County CASA/GAL
Program, Inc.
18th Judicial District
(406) 582-2051
Email: guardian@gallatin.mt.gov

Front Range CASA/GAL, Inc. (Conrad)
9th Judicial District
(406) 576-7041
Email: frontrangepcasa@3rivers.net

5th Judicial District Voice for Children,
Inc. (Beaverhead, Jefferson and
Madison counties)
(406) 925-1405
Email: casa-gal@hotmail.com

CASA-CAN: Children's Advocate
Network (Great Falls)
8th Judicial District
jpylarcasa@gtfalls.com
(406) 454-6738
www.casacan.org

Bitterroot CASA (Hamilton)
(406) 961-4535
Email: bttrcasa@msn.com
www.bitterrootcasa.org

Staci,* an articulate and poised young woman, spoke at the *Leadership Summit for the Protection of Children* in June. Staci is a 17-year-old high school student who shared her life story and history of abuse with a group of strangers at the Summit. The fact that those strangers were judges, lawyers, social workers and Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) staff trying to make the system work better for foster children didn't make it any easier.

She talked openly about abuse by her father and then by her stepfather, as well as her mother's inability to be an effective parent. "I hope I can overcome a lot of bad people in my life," she says. "If I didn't have these guys in my life (her CASA volunteer and other adults) I could honestly say I would be dead, really messed up on drugs or be pregnant."

After Staci spoke, she hugged all of the adults who were supporting her from the audience—her CASA, her Child Protective Services worker and her foster parents. Many of us came away impressed and inspired by her story. Now other people will see and hear her story on a new DVD about CASA.

What is CASA?

CASA is an acronym for *Court Appointed Special Advocate*. In 1977, concerned over making decisions about abused and neglected children's lives without sufficient information, a Seattle judge conceived the idea of using trained community volunteers to speak for the best interests of these children in court. This pilot program was so successful that judges across the country began using citizen advocates. In 1990, the U.S. Congress passed the *Victims of Child Abuse Act*, which encouraged the expansion of CASA. Today there are more than 950 CASA programs in operation across the country; more than

68,842 volunteers donate over 5.8 million hours.

CASA Montana is structured to meet the needs of abused and neglected children through the work of trained volunteers. Fifteen local non-profit groups work together for the welfare of Montana's children to provide them with voices, hope and futures. Court Appointed Special Advocates are community volunteers appointed by judges and trained by local program directors to speak up, in

court, for abused and neglected children who have been removed from their homes through no fault of their own. Most of these children are in temporary foster care and group

homes, so CASAs often become the only constant in these children's lives.

With information provided by CASA volunteers, judges can make more informed decisions as to what is best for each child. These volunteers are often appointed as a Guardian Ad Litem (GAL) for a child. CASA/GAL volunteers review records, gather information, and talk to everyone involved - parents, teachers, foster parents, therapists, and of course, the child. From this information, they present recommendations to the judge as to what is best for the child.

CASA of Montana is a network of 15 local CASA/GAL offices. These programs

CASA volunteers play a critical role in a foster child's life, as Staci reminded the Summit attendees.

In 2008, CASA volunteers served over 20,000 hours on behalf of more than 900 Montana children, about 60 percent of the 1,500 who were in out-of-home care.

provide trained volunteers as advocates to children in about 60 percent of the abuse/neglect cases in the

state. At this point, more than 450 volunteers in Montana are advocating for nearly 900 children in 40 counties around the state.

Telling the CASA story is not easy. Many times CASA kids must remain nameless and faceless. Staci's story helped

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those involved with CASA to put a face on the young people who need advocates. Staci reminded us of all the young people aging out of foster care and how much they need support and a continuing voice for advocacy.

Federal law requires a Guardian Ad Litem in each dependency case, but court funding covers only about a third of the costs of providing these services through the CASA lay advocate programs. The 15 local CASA programs are challenged to recruit, fundraise and write grants. These programs do an impressive job with limited resources. All of them operate on less than \$1 million a year. In 2008, volunteers donated almost 20,000 hours of time. That volunteer time is worth more than \$1 million, if valued at the \$60 an hour paid to an attorney if a CASA volunteer is not available.

CASA of Montana provides network services for local programs, assisting with program training, education and state outreach. CASA of Montana works collaboratively with court programs, child and family services, local programs, public defenders and attorneys. The June *Leadership Summit* brought together almost 200 people to work collaboratively at the local level to improve the system for our children.

A CASA volunteer provides a carefully researched background of the child and family in order to help the judge make a sound decision about the child's future. Each case is unique. The CASA GAL (Guardian Ad Litem) helps the judge determine whether it is in the child's best interests to stay in foster care, be returned to the parent(s), or released for permanent adoption. To prepare a recommendation to the court, the GAL talks with the child, parents, family members, social workers, school personnel, health providers, and others familiar with the child's situation and background.

CASA volunteers gather information from Child Protective Services, foster parents, schools, therapists, resource officers and other service providers to provide a report to the court. These volunteers are hard working, committed people who

often hold a full time job. Their job is to advocate for the best interest of the child.

Each volunteer must complete a 30-hour National CASA training program before beginning service. Each volunteer goes through a background check and interview before joining the training class. Local CASA programs train volunteers in their community, involving local experts, judges and service providers.

CASA volunteers are ordinary people who are committed to doing what is best for children. CASAs come from all walks of life, with diverse professional, educational, and ethnic backgrounds. Over 50 percent work full-time. The common denominator is a sincere concern for the well-being of children. CASA volunteers are thoroughly trained in courtroom procedure, social services, the juvenile justice system and the special needs of abused and neglected children. CASA GALs advocate for children during complex legal proceedings, help explain the reasons their cases are before the court, the roles of the judge, attorneys, and social workers, as well as what is happening in court. CASAs also encourage children to express their opinions and hopes, while remaining objective observers.

CASA volunteers usually handle only one or two cases at a time, which allows them to identify pieces of the puzzle that may not be obvious to others. The volunteer may notice learning difficulties or find specific resources that can help a specific child. They can encourage the child's parents to work on the court treatment plan developed by the Child Protection Services worker. Through careful listening and consistent contacts with the family, CASA volunteers may also learn about a relative who is interested in the child if parental rights are terminated.

—Ellen M. Bush is the Executive Director of CASA of Montana. For more information, see www.casagal.org or call 866-863-2272.

**The name has been changed.*

CASA programs cont'd

CASA of Hill County
12th Judicial District (Havre)
(406) 265-6743 ext.135
Email: casa@hrdc4.org

CASA-Advocates for Kids (Helena)
1st Judicial District
(406) 457-0797
Email: bcollins-casa@qwestoffice.net
www.helenacasa.org

CASA for Kids (Kalispell)
11th Judicial District
(406) 755-7208
Email: casafvmt@centurytel.net
www.flatheadcasa.org/

Sixth Judicial District CASA (Livingston)
(406) 222-4904
Email: ann@casajd6.org
www.casajd6.org

Prairie CASA/GAL (Malta)
(406) 390-3550
spk4kids@yahoo.com

Eastern Montana CASA/GAL (Miles City)
7th and 16th Judicial Districts
(406) 234-2354
Email: casagal@midrivers.com

CASA of Missoula, Inc.
4th Judicial District
(406) 542-1208
Email: casamissoula@gmail.com
www.casamissoula.org

CASA of Lake County (Polson for Lake and Sanders (not in Sanders))
(406) 883-0158
Email: dianer@cskt.org