

Each Child Matters- Volunteers Advocate One Case at a Time

By Cheryl Conway

With the help of numerous volunteers, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) has helped thousands of children to live happier lives.

For the past 35 years, CASA has served more than 7,000 children with 2,500 from Sussex County. The organization was founded in Morris County in 1987 and began in Sussex County in 1996.

"The mission of CASA of Morris and Sussex counties is to be a strong voice for the best interests of vulnerable children who have been removed from their homes or are under court supervision due to abuse, neglect or abandonment," explains Dr. Lisa Barsky Firkser, CASA executive director. "We recruit, train, and supervise community volunteers to be advocates, mentors and champions for each child on his or her journey to a safe, permanent and nurturing home."

"The child victims we serve have been placed by New Jersey's Division of Child Protection and Permanency (DCPP) in foster homes or in residential facilities (out-of-home placements)," she continues. "Our volunteer advocates conduct fact-finding inquiries of the child's case file, serve as the eyes and ears of the Family Court judges and act as an independent voice for the child in court proceedings."

Currently there are 26 volunteers assigned to children in Sussex County and 93 assigned

to children in Morris County, says Firkser.

Each CASA volunteer is assigned to a specific child or sibling group and works to secure critical community resources and services such as therapeutic evaluations; educational testing and interventions; tutoring services; medical and dental services; transportation; and extracurricular activities.

CASA volunteer advocates undergo intensive background checks and training and spend from 10-25 hours per month advocating for their assigned CASA children.

"For youth who have reached the age of 14 and have not yet been placed in a permanent home, our organization provides mentors who help prepare the youth for independent living before their eventual emancipation from the foster care system between the ages of 18-21," says Firkser. "Without advocacy, services, interventions and safe, loving homes, these youth face negative outcomes into adulthood. Other than CASA of Morris and Sussex counties, there are no other organizations providing court-appointed and approved advocacy services for these vulnerable children in foster care."

One of the challenges has been language barriers and bilingual volunteers.

"Such barriers to communication present a major challenge for our volunteers to build trust and collect detailed information about the child's well-being."



CASA volunteer, assistant director, Beth Huron, and Lisa Barsky Firkser, executive director, attempt to play guitars that Mike Huron refurbished for two youths in CASA's foster care. Photo submitted by Dr. Lisa Firkser

To help, CASA has been teaching Spanish to its volunteers and staff so they can work with Spanish-speaking children and families.

"We can't fix the foster care system," says Beth Huron, CASA advocate. "It's not perfect. But we all can make it better, even if we are doing that one child at a time. It's just the small things. If we all just reach out and help out each other, if everyone in a community did that."

Her husband, Mike, has been refurbishing guitars for CASA youth.

"The guitars are gorgeous and Mike re-strings them and makes them look brand new," says Firkser. "Our youth are enjoying this musical outlet to play and be able to express themselves through music."

For more information, visit www.casams.org or call 973-998-7590.






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