

Volunteers Are In It For The Kids

CASA of Central Oregon steps in for foster children in ways no one else can.

In Central Oregon, there are more than 350 active child welfare cases, with a growing population of children entering the foster care system. Tragically, due to a heavily overburdened system, many of these children will slip through the cracks and grow up with unmet needs and possibly ongoing abuse. They get passed around from foster home to foster home and from caseworker to caseworker, and may not have anyone looking out for them.

There is one local nonprofit agency, however, that steps in where no one else does: CASA of Central Oregon. Staff and volunteers from this program intervene for these suffering children, taking time to get to know them, then going to bat for them in the courts.

"CASA" stands for "Court Appointed Special Advocates" for Children. The mission of CASA of Central Oregon is to recruit, train and support CASA volunteers, who advocate for the best interests of abused and neglected children in the court system. The volunteers — backed by the staff of CASA of Central Oregon — work within the courts in collaboration with key agencies, legal counsel and community resources to ensure that every foster child in Central Oregon can transition into a safe and permanent home.

Nationally, CASA was created in 1977 from a model established by a Seattle family court judge who found that the involvement of volunteer advocates brought greater insight and awareness to the courts in determining a child's best interest.

CASA was established in this



area in 1992. In 2005, Crook, Deschutes and Jefferson Counties merged, establishing CASA of Central Oregon.

"Our community's commitment is to make sure every child in foster care has a committed individual who is making sure they receive all needed services," said Jenna App, executive director of CASA of Central Oregon. "In Central Oregon, an average child in the foster care system will spend two to three years in foster care. During that time, they will have two to three DHS

(Department of Human Services) caseworkers and be in two to three different foster homes, but they have one CASA volunteer. We are the singular agency that tries to create one-on-one relationships."

"CASA is without a doubt the one program that has the most effect on the kids," said Janice Mottau, who, along with her husband, Leo, has volunteered with the program for five years. "The judge listens to us. We can gather facts and get to know the kids and their situation. We have access to all

the people working with them: doctors, teachers, counselors, both biological parents, foster parents or anyone else we want to talk to," said Mottau, who has had foster children in her own family over the years. "I'm in it to make a difference for these kids."

CASA volunteer Greg Reeves is also in it for the kids, he said. A retired police officer, Reeves investigated child abuse cases in his work for the department.

"Most of these kids come from not-so-great backgrounds, and in most cases the parents haven't

really advocated for them in normal ways. CASA makes sure they are getting whatever they need, be it counseling or special school programs."

While CASA's primary concern is the children it serves, the parents are also helped by the program.

"I want to help get the kids back on the right track, but I try to make sure the parents stay on the right track too, whether it's a rehabilitation program or counseling," said Reeves, who has been a volunteer with CASA for more than two years. "Some kids come from homelessness. We work with other agencies such as NeighborImpact to help families find a place to live. That's a big stress off the parents' plates so that they can concentrate on what they need to do."

Many of the parents he deals with have gone through drug court, and when they get their children taken away from them, it's a wake-up call for them that things need to change, Reeves said.

"When the parents show you their rehab graduation certificate, it's a big deal to them. It's nice to see someone work their way up from a dark place and experience happiness. They like the place they are now; they might be drug-free and have a place to live," he said. "Lots of parents appreciate the fact that the court system and other agencies as a group are really set up to try to help them. The people in charge from the CASA office

really care about these kids, and the advocates do too."

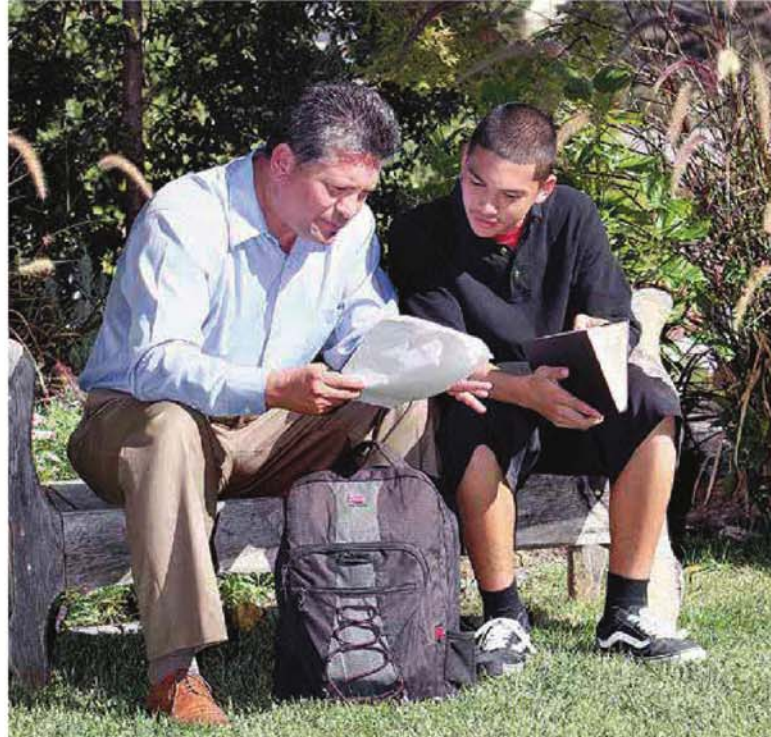
"I love working with CASA," said Janice Mottau, a retired quilt store owner. "People really care about their cases. I have nothing but praise for the staff at CASA, they are nothing but supportive to us. They work hard and are a great asset to the community and the people involved in the family court system."

To help CASA of Central Oregon be as effective as possible, partner programs such as Family Find have been established.

"We have a full-time person placed at DHS to go deep into trying to find longer-term family connections," said App. "This results in amazing placement stories, like a second cousin who doesn't even know a child exists, but is in a place to be able to take them in." She added, "For these kids, the sense of self and sense of place is just gone for the moment."

Finding a relative who is willing to establish a long-term, healthy relationship with the child helps establish a sense of family when there might not otherwise be any, App said.

Nationally, App said CASA has done a lot of research on the benefits of this program, and has found that children in foster care who have a CASA volunteer advocating for them do much better than those who don't. They receive more mental and emotional support, do better in school, are



more likely to get adopted and are half as likely to re-enter the foster care system.

"That's the pressure," said App. "The whole staff feels it. It's very motivating."

"I've worked with a lot of nonprofits, and this is the first one in which I feel like I have really had an impact," said Leo Mottau, a retired lumber mill owner. "The judge usually sides with CASA because we don't have a conflict of interest. They know our objective is for the child and their best interests. That's why the judge appoints us."

Part of what makes CASA advocates so effective in what they do is the high level of training they receive. Volunteers go through 34 hours of training on courtroom procedures, the Juvenile Justice system and the special needs of abused and neglected children. When training is complete, they are sworn in as officers of the court and then spend 10-15 hours per month on one specific case. They research the case, talk with everyone involved and build trusting relationships with the child or children. The advocates then prepare reports for the court based on what they believe is

best for the child to help the judge make the most informed decision possible. To assist with all this, volunteers are paired with a staff professional who supports and guides them through the process.

"It's pretty intensive," said Janice Mottau, who as a CASA peer coordinator helps and oversees other volunteers and their cases. "We learn about laws, our position and requirements, what we can and cannot do and on having empathy. We are trained on how to understand what it feels like to be in these situations, like being low income or having drug and alcohol issues, mental illness or family violence."

Once a volunteer is trained, he or she follows a case through to the end, which is when the child has a permanent home.

"Our staff can help match a volunteer with an appropriate case," she said. "It can be short and quick, though the average duration is two years, and it can be three to four years. Most volunteers take another case when they are done with their first one."

To assist with their efforts, advocates receive ongoing training once a month, and accrue an additional 12-15 hours of training



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“I’m in it to make a difference for these kids.”**

— Janice Mottau, CASA volunteer

a year to keep up on changing laws, services available in the community and other pertinent information, said Janice Mottau. During the ongoing trainings, representatives from supporting agencies such as Big Brothers Big Sisters, Boys & Girls Club and Bend Park & Recreation come to offer presentations about what’s available to the kids.

“It’s intriguing to find ways to help the families through organizations that can help,” said Janice Mottau.

App said there isn’t a particular profile for a “typical” CASA volunteer, but many are recent retirees in their mid-50s to early 60s who have a little more time to dedicate.

“They have a real passion to service children’s justice issues. They want to ensure our foster care system is doing right by our children,” she said.

“I intend to do this as long as I can and for as long as I’m able to be effective,” said Janice Mottau.

While the current volunteers are enthusiastic and dedicated, App said the supply is not keeping up with the demand.

“We don’t have enough advocates. Our organization isn’t growing fast enough to respond to the growing population of children going into foster care, she said, adding that the current count of active advocates is 100. “Deschutes County is the fastest-growing county in Oregon. Right now, 65 percent of the kids have an advocate. A couple of years ago, we were at 85 percent. Without a volunteer advocate, we don’t have the resources to provide the very important one-to-one help.”

Funding the program is another difficulty faced by CASA of Central

Oregon, App said.

“Fundraising is crucial. Even though CASA is a state-mandated program, we only get 18 percent of our funding from the state,” she said. “The rest is through fundraising. That’s a challenge for us.”

To help offset this situation, CASA of Central Oregon has a fundraising event every May, gets sponsorships from community partners such as local businesses and receives grants from private foundations.

Reeves said he believes that the hardest part of being a CASA volunteer is seeing how some of the kids live.

“I have found the people who volunteer with CASA to be very dedicated, but sometimes we lose advocates because it hurts too much to see what these kids have gone through. It’s really tough to deal with.”

Reeves, who also serves as a peer coordinator, said that despite the emotional side of volunteering for CASA, the reward comes in watching the kids’ situations improve step by step.

“It’s good to see things get better,” he said. “As a cop, once I was done with a case, I never knew what happened to these kids. Most cops wonder what happens to the kids, if their lives get better or worse. It’s nice to hear of a happy ending once in awhile.”

CASA offers several trainings each year, with the next one beginning this winter.

For more information about CASA of Central Oregon or to apply to volunteer, visit casaofcentraloregon.org.

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