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HELPING THE HELPLESS

CASA volunteers say that being a child's advocate is very rewarding

By Bridget Clerkin/The Times of Trenton

MERCER—Thinking of all the children not able to sleep in their own beds used to keep Lori Morris from falling asleep in hers, so she joined an organization meant to fill in the cracks of the foster system to prevent more children from falling into them.

She's not alone. While they represent a variety of occupations, ages, races and backgrounds, the volunteers of Mercer County Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children (CASA) program have a singular goal in mind: to help the helpless.

The CASA organization provides an advocate in court for children who have been removed from their homes due to abuse or neglect, helping them find a safe and permanent place to stay, whether it be with their parents, another family member or through an adoption.

But if the organization doesn't recruit more volunteers, hundreds of children in Mercer and Burlington counties will go through the proceedings without such support.

"For a child being removed from their home, one day can seem like an eternity, and days turn into weeks, weeks turn into

"People are having children they're ill-equipped to have. They don't want to take care of them. They abuse them. I grew up with five kids and a single parent, but our hair was always combed, there was always something to eat, and we did well in school."

CASA volunteer Barbara Hairston

months, months turn into years, and that can do some lasting damage for a child," said Morris, the executive director of the Mercer County CASA. "A lot of CASA (volunteers) find they're the only consistent person in the child's life, so when they follow



Mercer County Court Appointed Special Advocates Executive Director Lori Morris at the organization's headquarters in Ewing.

(the children) from home to home it's really comforting for the child to see the same person."

A separate organization from the Division of Protection and Child Permanency — formerly known as DYFS — the group's volunteers work instead for the court system and report directly to the judges in the cases.

Their objective is to compile unbiased and fact-based reports on each child's situation along with recommendations based on the individual case and what they believe would be best for the child going forward.

Aside from meeting with the child — or in some cases, siblings — CASA volunteers collect information on the child's progress until the case is closed, including keeping tabs on their educational, mental and physical well-being.

In many cases, Morris said, they step into the roles of parents or guardians, attending parent-teacher conferences or following up with doctors after a medical visit.

Still, the organization is limited by the size of its volunteer corps, Morris said. Last year, that left a gap of at least 200 area children without CASA representation.

Though absolute numbers are difficult to compile as cases are always changing and some children are only removed from their homes for several days, by June of last year, 369 children in Mercer County had been taken away from the place they were

living, and between July 2012 and June of last year, 600 children were removed from their homes, according to numbers provided by Morris. During that time, CASA had just around 100 volunteers.

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CASA volunteer Bill Dredge



Mercer County Court Appointed Special Advocates case supervisor Teri Triano-Davis (center) with children's advocate volunteers William Dredge, Barbara Hairston at the organization's headquarters in Ewing.

And while the program recently initiated about 50 new volunteers, Morris estimated the group is still only reaching about 40 percent of the children in need in Mercer County, and only 16 to 18 percent of children in the foster system in Burlington County, which is also serviced by the Mercer County CASA organization.

There's more children who are eligible for our services than we can help now," Morris said. "We have a waiting list in Mercer County. We need volunteers right now. We would love anyone who's interested."

It was the idea of helping children that inspired William Dredge to volunteer. A Princeton resident, Dredge is working on his fourth case for the group since joining in 2012.

"Children are our future," he said. "Not all of them have two great parents who raised them and wanted them. Some of them are abused and neglected to the point where they're severely at risk and need a voice."

After researching the organization and the steps it takes to become a volunteer — one must be 21 or older, pass a background check and go through several training courses — Dredge said he realized that it was the best way for him to become a positive force in an otherwise negative situation. "I thought if I could keep just one child out of the gangs and away from drugs when they age out of the system, it would be worth it," he said. "Once you start doing it, it becomes clear that, as a volunteer effort, it could be very effective." And the training provided by CASA helps him from becoming too emotionally affected by what he sees, he said. Instead, Dredge focuses on the

good he could do for the child and focuses on the research the job calls for, putting in around 10 hours a week, he said.

Already a philanthropist involved in her church and several other charities, volunteer and Hamilton resident Barbara Hairston, who has been with CASA for six years, didn't think she would have enough time to incorporate the volunteer work into her schedule at first. Still, she said she found it easier than she imagined, and she was motivated to do the work, feeling she was an advocate for the children.

"People are having children they're ill-equipped to have. They don't want to take care of them. They abuse them," she said. "I grew up with five kids and a single parent, but our hair was always combed, there was always something to eat, and we did well in school. Every day I leave court I thank God for my mother." Now, she hopes to offer the same stability to the children whose cases she oversees.



Mercer County Court Appointed Special Advocates executive director Lori Morris and case supervisor Teri Triano-Davis with children's advocate volunteers Barbara Hairston and William Dredge at the organization's headquarters in Ewing.

It's a goal shared by volunteer Alex Chandler, a Burlington County resident who joined CASA nine years ago. For the past five years, he has been working on the same case with the same child — an experience that has helped him see first-hand the stabilizing effect the program offers.

"If anything, this work puts into perspective the life of these children and the life of people who don't have these types of issues," Chandler said. "There's so many children out there in the foster-care system. They're there for no cause of their own — there were adults who didn't take responsibility — and they need someone on their side, someone who's consistently on their side, who can speak for them in court and who can help them find permanency."

For more information about becoming a CASA Volunteer please visit www.casamercer.org or call 609-434-0050.