

Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children
of Mercer and Burlington Counties

2017 Annual Report

An Advocate for Every Child



Together, we ensure successful outcomes for abused and neglected children.



CASA

Court Appointed Special Advocates
FOR CHILDREN

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A Message from Our Board President and Executive Director

Dear Friends,

Did you know a child with a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) is more likely to get better services and find placement in a safe, loving, permanent home more quickly than a child who is moved through the system without a CASA? CASA for Children of Mercer and Burlington Counties is part of a national network of nearly 1,000 community-based programs that recruit, train and support volunteers to advocate for the best interests of abused and neglected children. In 2017, CASA had 258 active volunteers, however, there were still over 1,000 children in Mercer and Burlington Counties who needed advocates. While we are proud of our accomplishments, we know there is so much more to do in order to provide an advocate for every child in out-of-home placement in our Mercer and Burlington service area.

Thanks to you, our donors and volunteers, we were able to serve 352 children in 2017; 200 children in Mercer County and 152 in Burlington County. This is an 11% increase over 2016. Our goal is to grow the number of children we serve by 25% year over year until we are able to serve 100% of the children in our two-county area who need advocacy so desperately.

Our growth plan is simple; we will increase volunteer recruitment and retention so that our services reach more children. We have introduced the National CASA Peer Coordinator program model that allows us to serve more children by utilizing experienced and trained volunteers as coaches to support our new advocates. This evidence based model enables CASA to increase capacity while keeping resources directed towards the children. We have expanded our Fostering Futures program, for adolescents aging out of foster care and we are implementing additional trainings to make all volunteers skilled Educational and Medical Advocates. All these initiatives strengthen our organization and improve outcomes for our children.

In this annual report, we pay tribute to our extraordinary CASA volunteers who fight hard every day to make sure that each child has a family and a home to call their own. We also recognize our generous donors for their investment in our efforts and for their concern and compassion for this underserved and most vulnerable segment of our community.

This is a great undertaking for a great cause and we cannot do it without your help.



Roseann Vanella
President



Katherine Carmichael
Executive Director

CASA for Children of Mercer and Burlington Counties Mission Statement

Our mission is to train and supervise community volunteers, appointed by the Family Court, to advocate for the best interests of children who have been removed from their homes due to abuse and/or neglect. Our dedicated volunteers strive to ensure the emotional, physical and educational well-being of these children while they reside in foster homes or residential facilities. The ultimate goal of our volunteers is to help establish a safe, stable and permanent home for each child we serve.

In Fiscal Year 2017

This is what your dollars have helped us achieve:



352

total
children
served.

Over 97%

of recommendations made
by our CASA volunteers
were accepted by the court.

Our volunteers gave

11,690

hours of their time
and closed 103 cases.

258

volunteers advocated for children.



14

experienced advocates
became Peer Coaches.

148

new children received CASA volunteers this year.

2,649

hours of pre-service
training.

87

new volunteers
were trained this
year.



CASA Volunteer's Perseverance Changed Mario's Life

Mario* was removed from his young parents as a result of their substance abuse challenges during the first few months of his life. Initially, he was cared for by a series of family members until he entered the foster care system at the age of five. Thankfully, soon after, he was adopted. He grew up to be an active little boy and a curious student. However, five years later, he started to develop what his adoptive mother claimed were "educational issues." Unable to cope, his adoptive mother wanted to "reverse the adoption" and hand him back to the state. Unfortunately, reversed adoptions happen far too often to these already vulnerable children.

Once again living in foster care, the Judge assigned Mario a CASA volunteer who made certain his educational needs were immediately assessed. As a retired teacher, Mario's CASA realized that he was simply suffering from a lack of stability and needed a more structured environment. The advocate partnered with Mario's case worker to have him placed in a home with on-site therapy and educational supports. Mario gradually improved throughout the year he spent in the supportive setting.

Now, with his adoption finalized, he has started middle school and is excelling in his classes. Our advocate spent twenty-eight months with Mario. She formed collaborative relationships with numerous people on Mario's case to ensure the most secure placement, from teachers and caregivers to legal professionals and case workers. Her perseverance has touched many of those around her. Mario's case worker now believes that each child should have a CASA volunteer in their corner. As Mario's advocate says, "CASA is the connective tissue between all the people assigned to a child's case."

A year of building bridges with new partners and communities to grow both in the number of advocates and the children we serve.

CASA Superhero 5K Run/Walk



CASA provided Comfort Cases to our children



Volunteer Appreciation Baseball Game and Picnic



Jumpin' Jazz Spring Gala



Stand Up for a Child Night of Comedy



Photos courtesy of Gary Horn



CASA Makes Sure a Child's Emotional Needs Are Addressed

It was after midnight when Mr. and Mrs. Wilson received a call that surprised even these most experienced foster parents. Their former foster daughter, Maria*, was calling and she wanted to return home. Although she previously had the option to join her two brothers and sister and become adopted by the Wilson's, she chose to be emancipated- as many youth over eighteen and living in foster care- choose to do. Maria had decided instead to move in with her new boyfriend. However, six months later the boyfriend had turned abusive and Maria, in complete distress, was pleading for the Wilson's to come and take her home. The Wilson's rushed to respond to her cry for help. Given her history of abuse and neglect by her biological parents, her foster parents fiercely wanted to ensure her safety. Again, Maria* was given a choice: to remain emancipated or be adopted by the Wilson's. This time, she happily agreed to be adopted and the Wilson's welcomed her back into their home to be reunited with her three siblings.

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Maria's Story Continued...

During the six month wait to process her adoption, her CASA volunteer worked with her and her foster parents to identify her mental health needs; she was depressed and had frequent nightmares related to her mother's abandonment. The children's biological mother had been missing for a long period of time. When legal aides attempted to find her to give up her parental rights, they were unable to locate her. This was particularly hard on Maria. As the oldest child, she remembered when she had a functional family unit with her biological parents before their issues with substance abuse.

Maria's CASA volunteer who had also served as the CASA for her three siblings continued to work closely with her foster parents to advocate for her needs. They fought for Maria to remain with her preferred therapist and identified resources to support the cost. They encouraged her to remain in contact with members of her mother's family, which allowed her to build some strong and loving relationships. Notably, her grandmother stepped in to plan a belated quinceañera for Maria's 18th birthday. Now, Maria is looking forward to studying nursing at a community college beginning this January. Given that only 6 percent of former foster child have a 2- or 4- year degree by age 24, Maria will have overcome many of the odds faced as an older child in foster care.



A CASA Volunteer Provides Consistency Throughout the Placement Process

Just over two years ago CASA volunteer Judy was assigned a case with two brothers, Jake* (age 10) and Bob* (age 12). The oldest of 5 siblings, these two boys had watched as their three younger siblings were adopted quickly by family members. The boys were placed together in a foster home but their Advocate Judy soon realized that despite the fact that most siblings want to stay together, these two were holding each other back. They did not get along and created an unhealthy living environment in their foster home. Judy suggested they be separated and the law guardian and caseworker agreed. Bob, who was excelling in school, was relocated to a new foster home within a better school district and Jake who was presenting behavioral challenges was placed into a therapeutic residential home and now attends a school that specializes in meeting both his educational as well as his social and emotional needs. While the outcomes are very different, each case is a success because each boy is thriving in their unique placement. These two outcomes exemplify the very essence of CASA's mission, which is to make sure that the best interests of the child are always front-and-center; there is no one best placement that suits every child.

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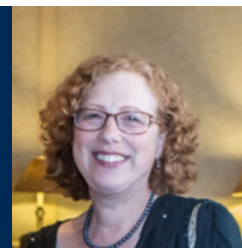
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Educational Needs are Paramount to Child's Future Success

Michele Ben-Asher has been a CASA volunteer for five years, successfully closing three cases. As a former educator, she believes strongly that teachers (or former teachers) make ideal advocates as they have seen first-hand the difference that education makes in young lives. Former National CASA CEO Michael Piraino recently pointed out that, "The educational outcomes for foster youth read like a list of all the things we don't want for our children: Lower grades, more behavior problems, higher rates of suspension from school, lower high school graduation rates, and very low postsecondary school completion rates."

The average child in foster care changes placement two to three times per year. With each move, these children lose months of educational progress. Additionally, children and youth in foster care are two to three times more likely than are other students to have disabilities that affect their ability to learn. Each move has its challenges and results in: incomplete educational records; failure to adequately assess children's educational needs and provide needed services; overlooked absenteeism, tardiness and truancy; and lack of adequate advocacy for children.

As a former teacher, Michele is able to see past the records that may be missing and see the child holistically as she works with caseworkers, foster parents, teachers, school district personnel, and law guardians. A recent case had her advocating for the educational needs of a child who had been classified as learning disabled and placed in a more restrictive educational environment. As his CASA, Michele identified that with a stronger educational support system he could succeed in a less restrictive setting. Six months after his adoption, this same child that was failing most of his classes while in foster care, is now on the honor role. A nurturing family and a great school have brought out this 13 year old's sense of humor. He runs track at his new middle school, attends church regularly with his new family, and is generally thriving. Michele counts his successes as proof of the effectiveness of CASA's Educational Advocates and reports that thanks to CASA, "this child has been saved."



Gina Balsamo, Peer Coach

There are more children in our service area who need a CASA than there are trained advocates to serve them. To help address this gap in services, CASA has implemented the Peer Coordinator program model designed by our National CASA organization.

The Peer Coordinator Model capitalizes on our experienced advocates, training and supervising them to become the direct support for the advocates appointed to cases. Gina has been an Advocate in Burlington County for three years. She was a stay at home mom with a background in law enforcement when one day she overheard a commercial for CASA on TV. She says, "It was like a magnet. I rewound and watched the commercial again." She immediately signed up and has been with her current case, three siblings in two separate homes, for 18 months.

Last spring, Gina learned about our plans to implement this new model while serving on the Burlington County Advocate Committee. She was nervous to become a Coach but was convinced as soon as she understood that we could double and even triple the number of children served. She found the training educational and feels well supported by her Supervisor and among her fellow coaches. She now reports to her Supervisor for both her case and for the Advocate assigned to her (who has one child).

Because cases can be so challenging, sometimes Advocates need a break when their case ends and indeed, one of the peer coaches serving with Gina was about to step back from being an Advocate. Becoming a peer coach gave her the opportunity to stay engaged and she now supports three advocates who each have multiple children so instead of CASA losing an Advocate, we have gained a Coach and are serving more children than a year ago.

Gina is a huge proponent of the new model "I've always felt like part of the CASA team, but being a peer coach allows me to have an even bigger role. My experience and my time is valued and I'm so proud to be part of this organization."

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Ines Ramirez and Luis Orta

Digesh and Sona Patel
Niralee Patel
Sehul Patel
David and Susan Paterson
Mary Alice and Robert Patterson
Hollis Pearson
Carolyn Phillips
Deborah Pica
Robert and Mary Pickens
Dr. Dean and Marte Pierson
Caroline and Victor Pisaniello
Anthony Pizzutillo
James and Nancy Pollock
Madeline and Francis Porcelli
Julie Potthoff
Mitchell Powell
Paul and Theresa Price
Neil Proshan
Kameron Rabenou
Jeanne Radimer
Andrew Jackson and Lillian Rankel
Michael and Joyce Rapoport
Margaret and Ravi Ravindranath
Barbara and David Reiff
Kathleen and John Renda
Laurie and William Renda
Peter Retzlaff
Anne Reynolds
Judy Rice
Ken Ritchey
Suzanne Rittenhouse
Aldo and Deborah Roldan
Miles Dumont and Llewellyn Ross
Mary Rudderow
Mary E. Rudy
Cheryl Runk
Louis and Kathleen Russo
Michael Saccomanno
Charlotte Sadechiga
Judy Sarvary
Sharif Sazzad
Nikki Scalia
Marty and Noriko Schneiderman

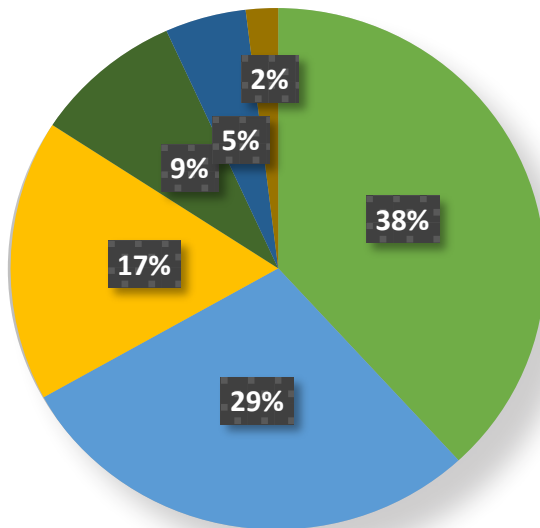
Marty and Noriko Schneiderman
Dr. Marc Schwarzman
Inez and Richard Scribner
Daniel and Sandy Shapiro
Robin Sheldrick
Larry Siegal
Dorothy Simms
Carl Christiansen and Jane Simpson
Natacha Smith
Marge Smith
Michael and Alison Snieckus
Carl and Melinda Sonnenfeld
Robert Staudt
Robert and Pegi Stengel
Bill Stern
Andrea and Richard Stine
Diane and Andy Strauss
Teresa Sydorko
Tom Cuniff and Linda Thurston
Janis Barondess Todd and Alan Todd
Carole Townsend
Miles Truesdell
Pam Turner
Michael Vaccaro
Carmela DeNicola and Roseann Vanella
Marie Vanella
Ramsay and Ann Vehslage
Shari Veisblatt
Nicole and Ryan Visniski
Diane Warfel
Dennis and Laura Waters
Angela and Michael Weaver
Joshua Weitz
John and Louise Wellemeyer
Helmut and Caroline Weymar
Kim Whittington
James and Martha Wickenden
Jay and Theresa Wrobel
Patrizia Zita



Fiscal Year 2017 Financials

July 1, 2016 - June 30, 2017

Revenue Breakdown

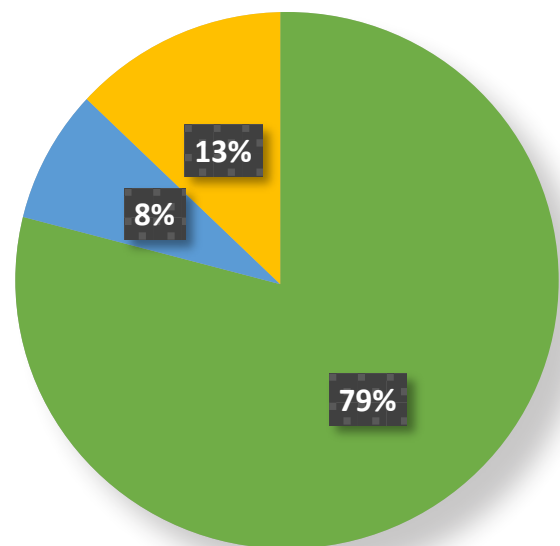


Government Grants	38%
Contributed Volunteer Advocate Services*	29%
Special Events	17%
Individual and Corporate Donations**	9%
Corporate and Foundation Grants	5%
In-kind Contributions	2%
Total	100%

Total Revenue: \$1,110,433

Program Services	79%
Fundraising	8%
Management and General	13%
Total	100%

Expense Breakdown

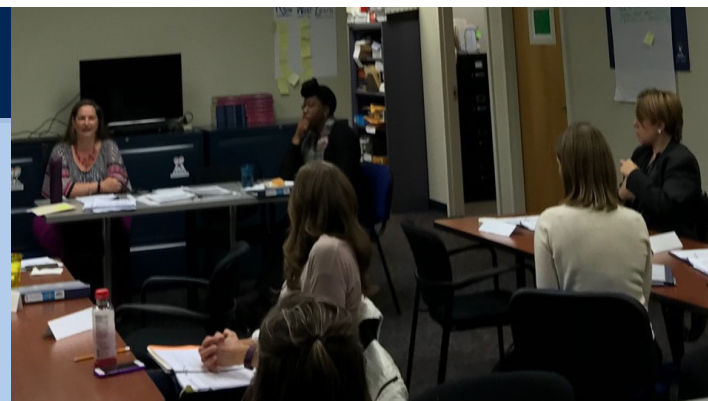


Total Expenses: \$1,185,013

Program Services Breakdown

21% Recruiting, Screening and Training Child Advocates

79% Providing Child Advocacy Services



*In Fiscal Year 2017, the organization received a total of 11,690 volunteer hours, donated at a rate of \$27.46 per hour for a total of \$321,000. The value of volunteer time came from Independent Sector. This amount does not include the additional 2,649 hours of pre-service training donated by advocates during FY2017.

**Not related to special events.



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FOR CHILDREN

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