



## ANNUAL REPORT

2019

EVERY CHILD NEEDS A CHAMPION!  
CASA FOR CHILDREN OF MERCER AND BURLINGTON COUNTIES





## 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.

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# Dear Friends of CASA,

As we begin a new year, we look ahead at what we must accomplish in 2020 to ensure the health and wellbeing of the children we serve in our community. But we have also reflected on the year just past and the impact that together we have had.

We are grateful for your support and interest in our critical work, allowing us to advocate for the best interest of children who have been removed from their homes due to abuse and neglect. It enabled us to help more than 448 children from our community – giving each a caring, consistent volunteer with the training and tenacity to get results.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of your generosity and commitment. Without you, these children might have no one to depend on. They'd be left with nothing more than a constant parade of strangers cycling in and out of their lives, asking the same questions and ticking the same boxes before disappearing, only to be replaced by the next. Imagine experiencing this loneliness and chaos...on top of losing your parents. It would be devastating to anyone, let alone a child.

If you read the paper or watch the news, you know the magnitude of the opioid epidemic in this country. While lawmakers, public officials, and the media focus on the public health crisis, we focus on the silent victims—the children. Of course, parental substance abuse isn't new, and we have always advocated for the best interests of children who have experienced abuse or neglect as a result of a parent's addiction. But over the last six years, the number of children in foster care across the country has risen 8 percent, a rise that public health officials, analyzing other data trends, increasingly attribute to the growing use of opioids. Sadly, we expect this number to continue to climb.

If this breaks your heart, you are not alone. It breaks mine, too. And what's worse is that this wave will not peak any time soon. If we want to save our children, we have to act now. Which means our role—and yours—has never been more vital. As an important part of the CASA movement, you can help bring stability to the lives of the lesser known victims of the opioid crisis, our children.

Let's not forget the work we do on behalf of teenagers. Sadly many are never adopted and age-out of the "system", entering adulthood with no permanent place to have ever called home. Our aging-out program offers resources, tools and techniques to give them the platform they need for a secure future. Partnering with local agencies, businesses and vendors, we offer a pathway to stability that is much needed for these vulnerable youths. Many of our advocates have dedicated themselves to these teens.

We're relying on you to help us bring these issues to more people's attention. Tell people why it matters and why it matters to you. Tell them about your involvement with CASA. If we want to help more children, we need to start by helping more adults learn the facts about these children and about us. Your knowledge, plus the relationships that you already have with members of your social and professional networks, make you the ideal teacher.

Think about the people you know: their interests, talents, and skills. If you have a friend, family member, colleague, or neighbor who has the potential to be a CASA volunteer or supporter—or if your company has a program that introduces employees to volunteer or fundraising opportunities—please, tell them about CASA For Children of Mercer and Burlington Counties. If you need brochures or other materials, just contact us.

I can promise you that wherever that time is spent—in court, on the phone, at a hospital, in a high school gymnasium or backyard sandbox—you will be giving children all the time they need to learn that it's safe to hope, to trust, to believe, and to move forward.

On behalf of all of us—staff, volunteers, board, fellow supporters, judges, and all the children who look into our eyes and see a brighter future—thank you.

Sincerely,



Laura Wall,  
Executive Director

***It would be devastating to anyone,  
let alone a child.***

# Interview with Laura Wall, CASA Executive Director

CASAs are trained volunteers who step up to assist judges and serve our community's most vulnerable children as local Court-Appointed Special Advocates. They work with a common set of values: they firmly believe in a child's right to be safe, treated with dignity, and to live in a home and not a system. They are committed to putting that belief to work for children who have been abused or neglected, while upholding the highest standards of excellence.

## What is it to be a CASA?

A Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) is a volunteer who is a positive and supportive person to a child in the Mercer and Burlington County foster care system. CASA for Children of Mercer and Burlington Counties is a member of the National CASA organization, a network of nearly 1,000 local community programs supporting children in the foster care system who have experienced abuse and neglect.

## Who can be a CASA volunteer?

Our volunteers are dedicated, trustworthy and compassionate people who are willing to serve as officers of the court and mentor a foster child in Mercer and Burlington. No special skills are required to be a CASA, but each CASA must have the desire and commitment to support an abused or neglected child. CASAs must be 21 years or older and pass a background check. Hundreds of foster children are waiting for a CASA.

## How much time do CASA volunteers spend with their kids?

About 10-12 hours a month. CASA volunteers submit reports to the court and attend court hearings regarding their child. In order to ensure stability and constancy for the children we serve, CASAs are asked for a commitment of 12 months with a child. Some cases are shorter, some are longer — our average is 26 months.

## How do I get started?

Attend a volunteer info session. This is your chance to learn more about the program and ask questions. At the info session, you will learn about the training we provide to become CASA certified. We offer different training classes throughout the year with options for either day or night sessions. After you are sworn-in as an officer of the court, you will be assigned a child to advocate for. The whole process usually takes about 3 months to complete, but that time-frame gives you the time and training needed to ensure you're prepared for this important role as a CASA.

### The Advocate

This is not about  
rescue, so as to feel good  
when the child lights up with a smile.

This is not about  
the comfort of compassion.

This is hard work,  
struggling with ripped families  
and children in clouds of pain,  
anger dancing around in their hearts

in the turmoil of a world  
made crazy. This is caring,  
yes, but also what is just,  
what should be demanded.

It takes love  
and a certain measure of courage.

And in the simple act  
of person helping person,  
It becomes extraordinary.

— Mercedes Lawry,  
Former Communications Director,  
National CASA



### **What kind of training do I receive to prepare me to help my advocate child with any challenges they experience?**

CASA trainees receive over 30 hours of initial training and 12 hours of additional training each year from professionals working in child welfare.

### **Once I'm assigned a child, where do I go for help with their case?**

Our CASA advocate supervisors are trained professionals with experience in everything from special education support to addressing domestic violence to mental health evaluation.

### **How do I know if being a CASA is right for me?**

99% of our volunteers say they are satisfied with their volunteer experience -- and many describe it as life-changing. But being a CASA is a major commitment: 10+ hours a month, several days in court a year, and monthly reports. If you want to make a difference for a child in need and know this is the right way to do it: please sign-up for an upcoming Volunteer Info Session to get detailed information on the joys and challenges of this role, and ask questions of our staff. There is no commitment involved in attending.



# CASA STORIES

Nancy has been in placement since birth and was 14 years old when finally assigned a CASA volunteer. It was clear to the CASA volunteer that Nancy needed the stability of a permanent family. One of the first things her advocate did was review Nancy's case file, in which she noticed a reference to a maternal grandmother who had expressed interest in adopting Nancy many years ago.

## ADOPTED AT 14 YEARS OLD

When the CASA volunteer asked Nancy's caseworker about the suitability of placing Nancy with her grandmother, the caseworker agreed she might be a potential resource, but due to the passage of time, the grandmother could not be located.

The CASA volunteer knew she had to do all she could to locate the grandmother - Nancy needed a family.

So, the CASA volunteer spent hours searching through archived files for reference to the grandmother. Finally she found out that she might be living in North Carolina and passed that information to the caseworker.

The grandmother was heartbroken to hear that Nancy had been in foster care for all those years, living without a family. She desperately wanted to meet her and provide her with the stability that she needed.

## THINGS CAN TURN OUT DIFFERENTLY

Thanks to the persistence and diligence of the CASA volunteer, the Division of Youth and Family Services is working to expedite the placement process so that Nancy can finally have the safe, permanent home she has always wanted.

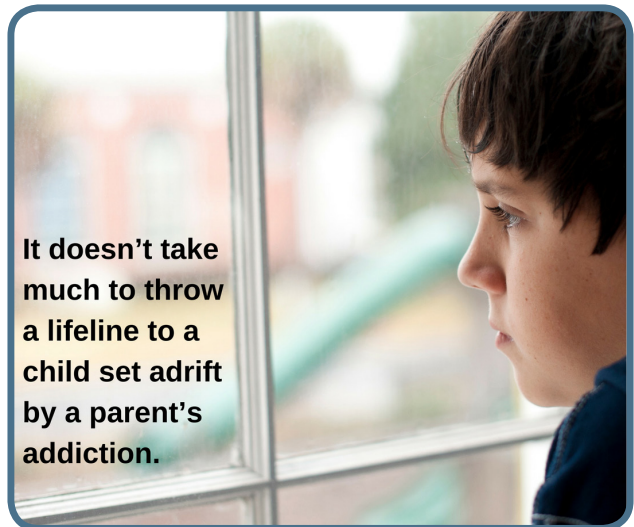


**When responding to a 911 call, police found Adam living with a drug-addicted mother who was suffering from severe hallucinations. Two days after Christmas, 7-year old Adam was under the supervision of the Division of Youth and Family Services and placed in a foster home.**

Several months later, a CASA volunteer was appointed by a Family Court Judge to advocate on Adam's behalf. What the volunteer found was a little boy with sad eyes and a weak smile, who was failing second grade and would probably be held back.

During several conversations, Adam told his CASA volunteer that his number one goal was to go home. Home to a mother to put him to bed at night. Home to a mother who fed him and gave him a bath. Home to a mother who didn't drink or see things that were not there.

Over the next few months, the CASA volunteer helped Adam adjust to his new surrounds and become healthier. She met weekly with Adam and helped his foster mom teach Adam about nutrition. The CASA volunteer met with Adam's teachers and tutors to make sure his educational needs were being addressed and she met with his doctors to ensure Adam was getting the



**It doesn't take much to throw a lifeline to a child set adrift by a parent's addiction.**

treatment he needed to address his behavioral problems and learning disabilities.

However, if there was any chance for Adam to go home, the CASA Volunteer knew she would have to help Adam's mother as well. To that end, the CASA volunteer helped Adam's mother find parenting classes, substance abuse treatment, and community support so she would be able to take better care of her son.

In September, just nine months after his removal, a clean and healthy Adam was returned to the care of his mother- a mother who has achieved sobriety and passed her parenting classes.

Now in the third grade, Adam is a happy little boy who has made significant progress in his school work and recently joined the Boy Scouts.

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We are also deeply grateful for the contributions of other individuals and organizations—including many longtime supporters of our work—who prefer to remain anonymous.

# KEY FIGURES



**15,586 HOURS**

Spent by CASA Volunteer advocates for abused and neglected children



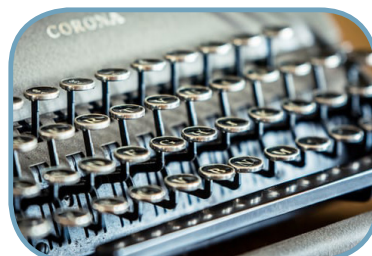
**87 NEW VOLUNTEERS**

Trained and Sworn in During FY2019



**143 NEW CHILDREN**

Assigned a CASA by the Court



**1598 RECOMMENDATIONS  
ACCEPTED**

Made by CASAs to the Courts on behalf of their Children.



**448**

children served



**30.2%**

more advocates trained

PUBLIC SUPPORT AND REVENUE		2019
Government and Pass-through Grants	\$	615,304
Corporate, Foundation and Other Grants		129,500
Contributions		93,268
Special Events		159,514
In-Kind Contributions - Contributed Services		401,649
Investment Income		1,765
<b>TOTAL SUPPORT AND REVENUE</b>		<b>1,401,000</b>
PUBLIC SUPPORT AND REVENUE		2019
Program Expenses		1,186,244
Management and General		135,397
Fundraising Expense		99,964
<b>TOTAL EXPENSES</b>		<b>1,421,605</b>



## You Can Be a Champion for a Child!

To sign up for an information session  
and learn more about volunteering for CASA,  
please visit  
[www.CASAMB.org](http://www.CASAMB.org).