



CASA rolls out volunteer recruitment campaign

by James Robertson

It all started in 1976 when a Judge on the Superior Court of Seattle Washington saw a recurring problem in his courtroom. In criminal and civil cases, Judge David Soukup explains that at the end of the day you walked out saying, "I've done my best. But when you're involved with a child you don't feel like you have sufficient information to allow you to make the right decision."

To ensure he was getting all the facts and the long-term welfare of these children was being represented in his court he came up with an idea which would change America's judicial procedure and the lives of thousands of children across the nation.

Obtaining funding to recruit and train community volunteers the program was implemented in Seattle in January of 1977, training 110 CASA volunteers for 498 children in its first year.

By 1982 it was clear that a national association was needed to direct CASA's emerging presence and the National Court Appointed Special Advocate Association was formed that year.

The sixth largest chapter of Court Appointed Special Advocates in the state of Texas, better known as CASA of Trinity Valley, serves the Henderson County area. This chapter ranks behind the major metro areas of Dallas, Houston, Austin, San Antonio, and Fort Worth, areas where people might expect large numbers of children to come into foster care.

CASA is the only volunteer organization that empowers everyday citizens as appointed members of the court. In an overburdened social welfare system, abused and neglected children often slip through the cracks among hundreds of current cases.

The number of children being served by CASA continues to rise each year. Total children served in 2013 totaled 529 and 633 children were served in 2014.

In calendar year 2015, the chapter helped a staggering 720 children. Over half of those children, 383 of them, came from Henderson County.

One hundred and forty five children were served in Anderson County during 2015 and Cherokee County served 192 children by contrast to Henderson County.

From January 1, 2016 to May 1, 2016, 110 new children, meaning children who came into care during that period and not carried over from last year, have been assisted by CASA of Trinity Valley.

Serving a highly rural area in Henderson, Anderson, and Cherokee counties, the numbers are truly staggering.

"Because the number of children coming into foster care continues to increase we've recently completed a major renovation at our Athens office," said Emily Heglund, Resource Development Officer for CASA.

“This became necessary in order to hire more staff to serve our volunteers and kids.”

Now that those renovations are complete, the organization is focusing on recruiting more community volunteers to provide voices for children caught up in the foster care system.

“A CASA volunteer helps ensure that the needs of abused and neglected children in the foster care system are met and that they reach permanency as quickly as possible,” said Heglund. “Being in foster care, even with a relative placement, leaves a child uncertain and in limbo. They have already suffered the trauma of knowing that the people who brought them into this world cannot or will not care for them properly. Languishing in the system only makes that child suffer even further.”

That’s where CASA comes in.

Court Appointed Special Advocates stand alongside these children, their families, and caseworkers to swiftly develop a plan for permanency, because every child deserves the safety and security of a stable, loving home.

“Volunteers are the heart of our program,” said Executive Director Lee Ann Millender. “Annually we serve six hundred to seven hundred children in our three counties. There simply is no way we

could do so without the incredible support and passion of our volunteers.”

Millender often tells people that this is the most intimate volunteer experience a person can have.

“There will not be anyone involved in the case that knows the children as the volunteer does,” said Millender. “The volunteer knows the child(ren) and their likes, dislikes, and desires. After all, the child is the focus for us and it is our desire to keep that child(ren) first and foremost in front of the court.”

In 1985 President Ronald Reagan presented the National CASA Association with the President’s Volunteer Action Award for “outstanding volunteer contribution, demonstrating accomplishment through voluntary action.”

With all the work speaking out for abused and neglected children, it’s easy to see why CASA is probably the most needed tax exempt organization in our county.

If you would like to make a difference in the life of a child who is caught in the limbo of the foster care system please visit www.casaoftv.org and fill out a volunteer application online.

