

CASA of Burlington and Mercer Counties

Bringing help and hope to abused and neglected children in the foster care system *By Kirk Randall*



RONNIE*, a nine-year-old boy from a town in Burlington County, was born with a serious neurological condition, one that carried with it many cognitive, psychological and physical challenges. He had the added misfortune of being abused and, at the age of 6, had to be removed from his home by DCP&P, the Division of Child Protection and Permanency (formerly The Division of Youth and Family Services, or DYFS).

Halfway through the school year, his difficulties in school had intensified—acting out, exhibiting multiple behavioral issues, even turning over a desk as a product of deep frustration over a group reading lesson. The causes of Ronnie's academic troubles were revealed with the help of a volunteer child advocate, and Ronnie's situation dramatically improved during the next few months.

Because of his advocate's training as a Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) volunteer, he was able to recommend to the judge a need for an educational assessment, which was court-ordered, and subsequently helped determine that the large class sizes were impeding his ability to learn. With the help of his foster parents, the advocate (Sam*) fought successfully for Ronnie to be placed in a small life-skills program, where he's now happy and engaged and enrolled in physical and speech therapy.

Ronnie's advocate was, and still is, a specially trained volunteer, trained by CASA of Burlington County. In the foster system in New Jersey at any one time, there are more than 10,000 children who are living in out-of-home placements (living in foster homes, group homes or residential

facilities), children who have been removed from their homes by the child welfare system for reasons of abuse and/or neglect.

In Burlington County, there are typically about 500 children in out-of-home placements at any point in time; CASA of Burlington County currently serves roughly 100 of these children. CASA of Burlington County is now part of CASA for Children of Mercer and Burlington Counties, an independent nonprofit organization committed to speaking up in family court for the best interests of abused and neglected children in those counties. CASA is a national organization with more than 1,050 local programs throughout the country.

"Since the merger of CASA of Mercer County with CASA of Burlington County in 2011, twice as many children are being served in Burlington County as in 2010, but our goal is to eventually serve all of them,"

"While educational advocacy is a very important part of what our advocates provide to these children," says Morris, "our mission is also to serve their best interests in the areas of medical, dental, psychological and recreational needs."

says Lori Morris, Ph.D., executive director of CASA for Children of Mercer and Burlington Counties.

The ultimate goal of CASA, Morris emphasizes, is to find safe and permanent families and homes (either reunification with family or adoptive families)

for children as quickly as possible, so they don't languish in the foster care system or leave the system without a family

of their own. The advocates stay involved with the child until permanency is achieved.

“While educational advocacy is a very important part of what our advocates provide to these children,” says Morris, “our mission is also to serve their best interests in the areas of medical, dental, psychological and recreational needs.”

It’s urgent, Morris emphasizes, for the children to find permanent homes, because research (The University of Chicago Chapin Hall Studies) shows the future looks grim for those youth who leave foster care without a permanent home or personal connection. Homelessness, unemployment, mental health issues and incarceration are too often the inevitable byproduct; a disproportionate percentage of foster youth experience this fate when they lack the basics of home or family.

When a child is removed from the home, his or her advocate often becomes the only consistent person in the child’s life. Adds Morris, “When a child moves six times in two years from home to home, often the very first person that he or she will see is their CASA. Our advocates serve as the eyes and ears of family court, giving the judge vital information on what is in the best interests of the child.”

Through bi-weekly visits with the child and his or her foster home, and interviews with DCP&P workers, foster parents, relatives, teachers, doctors and others important in the child’s life, the advocate provides up-to-date information in a written report to the judge on how the child is doing, along with recommendations for services.

This past year in Mercer and Burlington counties, 172 volunteers advocated for more than 266 children, representing more than 13,000 donated hours. Their time is truly donated: other than “emotional satisfaction,” they are not reimbursed for any of their time, services or expenses. So who are these somewhat remarkable volunteers?

“Our volunteers really do run the gamut: from retirees to teachers, to stay-at-home parents, to lawyers to social workers to business owners,” says Anne Callahan, volunteer recruitment coordinator for CASA of Mercer and Burlington Counties. “When people ask whether they have enough time, we point out that about 40 percent of our advocates work full time. But it is a decision, because we re-



quire an 18-month commitment and approximately 5-15 hours of their time each month. They do receive tremendous support from their case supervisors and our organization.”

CASA advocates—after being carefully screened and accepted into training—undergo 32 hours of pre-service training, which follows the interactive national CASA curriculum (and includes guest speakers from the court, DCP&P and service providers) and three hours of courtroom observation. Once they’re assigned a “case,” the case supervisor helps them to develop a professionalized approach, better understand the court and child welfare system, and navigate the various medical and educational bureaucracies to better serve their “kids.”

Additionally, says Morris, advocates greatly benefit from ongoing training. “In order for advocates to remain effective,” she points out, “they have to be provided with continuous in-service training, conducted by social service professionals, to address changing court and DCP&P policies, as well as substantive issues facing the children. Our staff has offered the CASA Graduate Series (monthly training by professionals) to address issues such as youth aging out of the system, the impact of domestic violence on children, and working with diverse populations such as lesbian, gay and transgender youth.”

For Morris and others who are immersed in the “CASA cause,” it always comes back to the children, who she describes, with a touch of awe, as heroic. “They endure more trauma and disruption than many of us do in a lifetime,” she says,

The Role of a CASA Volunteer:

CASA volunteers are appointed by judges, and for many abused and neglected children, their CASA volunteer will be the one constant adult presence in their lives.

CASA Volunteers:

INVESTIGATE

CASA volunteers carry out an objective examination of the child’s situation, including relevant history, environment, relationships, and the medical, dental, educational, psychological and recreational needs of the child.

FACILITATE

CASA volunteers identify resources and services for the child and facilitate a collaborative relationship between all parties involved in the case.

ADVOCATE

CASA volunteers speak up for the child in court by making recommendations regarding the child’s best interests in a comprehensive written court report.

MONITOR

CASA volunteers keep track of and report whether the court orders and the plans of the protective services agency are carried out.

adding there are many stories that have stayed with her over the years.

One such story epitomizes the profound way an advocate can affect a child’s life. An 8-year-old girl named Lily*, separated from her twin brother and placed in five different foster homes over four years, was finally adopted. Since the case was closing, the CASA volunteer came for one last visit. Lily was softly singing, “If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands ...” The advocate gently asked her, “Why are you happy, Lily?” She looked up with a smile and said, “Because I have a home.”

The need for more CASA advocates is strong, as the courts in both counties have more cases than can be accommodated due to the lack of volunteers, says Morris. Pre-service training is offered quarterly and the organization is currently recruiting for Winter Training, to be held mid-January 2014, and Spring Training, to be held in April. To attend an information session (also held at both offices), visit www.casaofburlingtoncounty.org to register, or contact volunteer recruitment coordinator Anne Callahan at (609) 434-0050. ■

*Name changed to protect privacy.

CASA for Children of Mercer and Burlington Counties

1450 Parkside Ave., Suite 22 | Ewing | CASAMercer.org | (609) 434-0050

137 High St., Suite 1C | Mount Holly | CASAOFBurlingtonCounty.org | (609) 265-2222