



**TESTIMONY OF MICHAEL S. PIRAINO
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, NATIONAL CASA ASSOCIATION**

**UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, JUSTICE, SCIENCE AND RELATED
AGENCIES**

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Chairman Wolf, Ranking Member Fattah, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to submit remarks on the Department of Justice (DOJ) Fiscal Year (FY) 2015 budget. On behalf of the National Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Association's network of 933 state and local CASA and guardian ad litem (GAL) programs in 49 states, including all of the states represented on this panel, I strongly urge the Subcommittee to fully fund the Court Appointed Special Advocates program through DOJ's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention at the Congressionally authorized level of \$12 million.

We appreciate the Subcommittee's long standing recognition of the overwhelmingly positive impact CASA programs have in the lives of abused and neglected children, and we urge your ongoing support as we strive to achieve our national goal of providing a CASA volunteer for every child in foster care. In the US today, too many of our 646,000 foster youth are going it alone. They want and need advocates to help them reach their full potential, and every day, CASA programs across the country provide an important voice in the lives of children beyond the walls of the courtrooms in which their cases are heard.

The effectiveness of the CASA/GAL program model in achieving positive, long-term outcomes for children in care is well documented and well supported. CASA volunteers are an influential protective factor in children's lives. A child with a CASA/GAL volunteer is more likely to receive needed counseling services, less likely to experience disruptive changes of placement, and more likely to pass all their courses in school. As community members with a vested stake in the long-term success of the children they serve, CASA

volunteers advocate against tremendous odds for the fundamental right of every individual to live in a safe and secure environment.

As the Subcommittee is acutely aware, foster youth face an extensive range of risk factors, including a much greater chance of juvenile delinquency and incarceration than the general youth population. According to data last collected by the National Institute of Justice in 2011, children who suffer from abuse and neglect are 28 percent more likely to be arrested as adults and 59 percent more likely to be arrested as juveniles. Through smart, targeted investments in a program that provides a stable, supportive advocacy-based presence in children's lives, together, we can stem the tide of youth delinquency in this nation and move our young people – high-risk foster youth included – toward a safe and promising future. The value of saving a high risk youth from a life of crime has been reliably estimated to range between \$2.6 and \$5.3 million.

As with a number of programs across the federal government, the Court Appointed Special Advocate program has weathered its share of funding cuts over the past few fiscal years as Congress works to achieve deficit reduction. I assure you that our programs have left no stone unturned in our quest to serve children, but we need the support of Congress to help vulnerable children, a population to whom we all share a significant obligation. These federal funds, which are leveraged with other state and local resources, have been a significant driver of increased service to children.

While CASA funding has decreased by half of the FY 2011 enacted level, the need for effective advocacy for foster youth in the courtroom – and the need for the robust training, technical assistance, and other resources that make this advocacy possible – has not at all diminished. Additionally, CASA/GAL programs across the nation are reporting that their cases are increasingly complex and challenging – including cases involving the overmedication of foster youth as just one example – which require additional time, energy, and resources, all of which are stretched significantly across our programs.

We ask the Subcommittee to provide funding for a program that not only transforms the lives of foster youth, but is also an effective cost investment of taxpayer dollars at a time in which every single one of those dollars must be spent wisely. CASA/GAL programs, in addition to advocating for a child's best interest in the courtroom and ensuring that he/she has the services needed to succeed, work to move the child out of the foster care system as quickly and as safely as possible. Less time in care is a better outcome for the child and it is a better outcome for state governments and federal child welfare programs, compared to the cost of keeping a child in care.

CASA volunteers save tens of millions of dollars in child welfare and other costs to society, as we work to keep at-risk youth out of the burgeoning prison system and on the path to promising, fulfilling futures. More than 90 percent of children with CASA volunteers never re-enter the foster care system. By reducing long-term placements, subsequent victimization, and reentry into the foster care system, the CASA program substantially

reduces foster care costs and significant costs associated with long-term services for children who have endured traumatic and difficult circumstances through no fault of their own.

To put this in simple accounting terms, it costs the federal government \$3,250 per month to keep a child in the foster care system. Every child with a CASA volunteer saves the taxpayer approximately \$24,375 per year, because our volunteers are moving these children safely out of the system. While a more efficient use of resources is of paramount importance, let me also emphasize the value of our work in purely human terms. Every day a child spends in the foster care system, is a day he or she can never get back. It is a day that they are unable to do many of the things that we take for granted in the lives of our own children – making lasting friendships, forming a bond with a teacher, enjoying the movements of everyday life with a loving family that is truly their own. All children deserve a safe, nurturing, permanent home.

I would also like to thank the Subcommittee for continuing to provide strong funding for DOJ's competitive youth mentoring grants program. This funding is critical to strengthening and expanding the reach of organizations across the country that positively impact the lives of at-risk and underserved youth. The mentoring programs funded through these grants build needed assets in young people and change their lives for the better.

We again ask the Subcommittee to fund the Court Appointed Special Advocates program at \$12 million in FY 2015 to address an overwhelming need for advocacy on behalf of abused and neglected children. Thank you for your consideration of this testimony.