Special Features & Profiles

Cover Story: Foster Care Adoption

Rita L. Soronen, executive director of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption and former CASA Program Director of the Year, writes in depth about foster care adoption. The Kaehler family of Morgantown, WV, share their inspirational story. Includes links to web-based adoption resources.

Voices & Viewpoints

Volunteer Voice

Frank McCoy, volunteer with CASA Kane County in Geneva, IL, speaks movingly about young Ryan. With Frank’s help, the boy comes out of his shell, makes the honor roll and is ultimately adopted by his foster mother.

From the President

Hon. Ernestine Gray reflects on last November’s celebration of Adoption Day in her New Orleans juvenile courtroom.

Partner Perspective

Ben Wilkins of Dallas CASA writes about how foster-adopt homes bridge the gap between removal and reunification, leading to faster permanency when parental rights must be terminated.

Youth Editorial

FosterClub All-Star Natasha Santos describes keeping difficult secrets. She eventually learns to trust adults again and is adopted by a loving family.

Regular Features

Top Tips for Volunteers

Hon. Michael Nash of the Los Angeles Superior Court and 2006 National CASA Judge of the Year describes five ways to promote adoption.

Association News

Omega Delta Phi Fraternity brings energy to CASA programs across US; results of the 2009 Connection reader survey

Trends in Advocacy

CASA program directors Cindy Booth of Indianapolis and Greg Millette of Tifton, GA, describe opposing trends in the numbers of local children in care.

Book Club

Growing Up in the Care of Strangers: The Experiences, Insights and Recommendation of Eleven Former Foster Kids by Waln K. Brown and John R. Seita

Child Welfare News

Child welfare organizations nationwide report on the latest research, publications and other news of interest to volunteers and other concerned adults.

Program Spotlight

Siobhan Greene, executive director of CASA of Monterey County in Salinas, CA, outlines her innovative volunteer recruitment campaign, “30 Advocates in 30 Days.”

Field Notes
Above and Beyond
Hispanic/Latino CASA volunteers reach out to recruit others. Profiles and tips provided by Valarie De La Garza. Article available in Spanish.

Closing Words
National CASA spokesperson Judge Glenda A. Hatchett outlines her new Parent Power Now! Initiative, inspiring adults to help 1,000,000 children post their dreams.

April is Child Abuse Prevention Month. Visit ShopCASA for your event needs.

Light of Hope candleholders $3.99
GrowCASA seeds $.30 each
Someone There for Me book $6.95

National Volunteer Week: April 18 - 24. ShopCASA.org
Volunteer Voice

Frank McCoy
CASA Volunteer
CASA Kane County
Geneva, IL

My wife Cathy has been a CASA volunteer since 2000. I saw how worthwhile she found her advocacy work, and we thought it would be rewarding to do something together. So I started as a volunteer about five years ago. We have separate cases, but we’re able to attend trainings and various meetings together.

In most of the cases we’ve been involved in, the children move from foster home to foster home, from social worker to social worker. And the CASA volunteer is the only constant in their lives. What keeps us going is that we can offer some stability and a positive influence.

Cathy and I have also witnessed the power of advocacy from the other side of the fence. We’ve been foster parents, and we’ve seen how hard CASA volunteers work for what the kids need.

In 2005, I had the privilege of being assigned to the case of a 12-year-old boy named Ryan. Ryan had been in the system since he was 4. He had been placed in various foster homes in Illinois, a relative home in Oklahoma, then back to Illinois after the relative placement failed.

When I met Ryan, he had just been moved into a home with a single foster mom who was caring for two other teenage boys. Ryan was not doing well in the home and not even attempting to succeed in school—he was getting all Fs. When I talked with him, he said he was done trying. He was going to sit there until he was 18 and then start his life again when he was on his own.

My first inclination was to get Ryan into a new environment. And then reality hit me like a two-by-four—where are you going to place an almost-teenage boy with an overwhelmingly negative attitude? Ryan was very fortunate to have a foster mother who loved him and believed in him as well as a caseworker who was willing to make tough decisions. But the foster mom was overwhelmed with the three boys. And while the caseworker was willing to keep moving Ryan, there were no available homes willing to take in a frustrated boy his age.

A positive development was that one of the other foster siblings—the one causing most of the trouble—was relocated to another home. Around the same time, Ryan became more attached to his foster mother’s fiancé, who owned a farm with animals. The boy started working on the farm. He burned up his excess energy baling hay and cleaning the barn. The animals became a source of pride for Ryan as he became really good at caring for them. He started to realize that people did love him and were proud of him, and the tide began to turn. He came out of his shell and started to try in school. Ryan made up two grade levels in one year and made the honor roll.

In the spring of 2008, Ryan was adopted by his foster mother and finally had what he had wanted all along—a family that loved him. When the judge asked Ryan if he wanted to change his name, his sense of humor kicked in and he said, “No, I am used to being called Ryan.”

With the persistent encouragement of representatives of the CASA program, everyone involved in Ryan’s care was able to stay focused on the boy. I worked with his caseworker to get him into special classes at school. But what seemed to help him most were our kitchen table chats. I was able to get Ryan to talk and listened carefully to his concerns. The entire team was then able to communicate and bring Ryan back from a desperate situation. The key was never giving up.
In weak moments, we volunteers may feel we are owed gratitude by the children—that they should be glad to have someone to talk with them and explain things. But that’s forgetting that in their whole lives they may never have had anyone keep a promise. It helps to focus on the long-term results you’re going to influence. Over time, you’ll prove to the young person that you’re not going away until they’re in a permanent home. The highlight of my volunteer career was seeing that happen for Ryan.
From the President

Adoption as a Means to a Permanent Family

Hon. Ernestine Gray
Orleans Parish Juvenile Court, New Orleans, LA, and
President, National CASA Association

It’s November as I write this, and our court just had its Adoption Day celebration this past Saturday. As I said at the opening of the event, adoption is the second most meaningful thing we do in the juvenile court for children and families. The first is clearly when we can return a child safely home. But when we cannot do that, the best we can do is create another family where children can be loved and nurtured. Adoption out of foster care is critical for children and needs the support of all civic-minded people.

During this economic downturn, I’m concerned that some people might say, “I can’t afford to adopt.” As they struggle to make ends meet, I hope all potential adoptive parents are aware that there are resources to help them take on the additional responsibility of a child. Adopting from foster care is affordable. As the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption points out, most child welfare agencies cover the costs of home studies and court fees as well as provide post-adoption subsidies. Thousands of employers—including the National CASA Association—offer financial reimbursement and paid leave for employees who adopt, and government tax credits are available to most families.
So many times, I've seen a CASA volunteer go to exceptional lengths to research or support a potential adoption or relative guardianship. There were a number of cases in my courtroom after Hurricane Katrina in which children were separated from their foster parents. Sometimes the volunteer found a relative who would be an appropriate placement for the child but who lived out of state. If the family services agency didn’t act quickly, the advocate made sure that the process kept moving and in the meantime promoted opportunities for children to visit their relatives.

One case from that time period involved an issue being raised about the fact that a potential adoptive mother was over 55. There was a threat to move the child into another foster-adopt home. The CASA volunteer was incensed, pointing out to the family services agency, “This baby is bonded to this lady, who is taking good care of her. You absolutely cannot change!” In fact the agency made a mistake in this case and didn’t ask the right questions. Once again, the CASA volunteer made extraordinary efforts that resulted in a successful adoption.

Even more detrimental than writing off older parents is giving up on our older youth. There’s a tendency to believe that younger children are “more adoptable.” I don’t think we should ever close that opportunity for young people. I’ve known of cases in which youth are adopted at 17 or 18. Why wouldn’t we advocate for that? Is anyone ever “too old” to have a family? We should work just as hard as we do for the babies to ensure that youth on the verge of aging out of the child welfare system be given the opportunity to become part of a family. It’s just as important to them.

Another issue that is particularly troubling to me in our state is when parental rights are terminated and siblings are broken up into multiple adoptive families. These young people then have no right to visitation with their brothers and sisters. This fact makes it imperative to do whatever we can to place sibling groups together in a family that is considering adoption.

Finally, we need to do a better job of actively recruiting foster and adoptive parents. We should no longer be ruling out whole classes of people, like those who are single, gay, over 55 or living with a disability. Such exclusion just doesn’t make sense when someone commits to providing a safe, loving home for a child. Who are we to say—we who already have homes and families—that a child shouldn’t have a family because we don’t find it “perfect”? If someone is willing to be trained and go through a background check and home study process, we need to look seriously at that potential adoptive parent. We should think long and hard about broad restrictions because we have so many children in foster care who need a permanent home.

With the continued advocacy of our CASA volunteers, I look forward to having even more to celebrate when National Adoption Awareness Month comes around again next November.
Partner Perspective

Foster-Adopt Placements Lead More Quickly to Permanency for Children

Ben Wilkins, LCSW
Director of Recruitment and Training
Dallas CASA, Inc.

In the child welfare system, where leaders and front-line workers struggle to find and maintain efficient ways of working, foster care adoption is one sure way of making the system work better for children.

The idea is simple: Children need safe, loving homes long before we know the outcome of the legal case. When children leave foster care to return to parents or kin, the expert care they received in a foster-adopt home bridges the gap between removal and reunification. "Foster-adopt" refers to foster parents who have indicated a willingness to adopt children placed in their care if appropriate.

But if children are unable to return to family, they will have a strong foundation of trust and familiarity as they face the loss of the connections they once knew. For abused and neglected children, foster-adopt care means finding out that your new home is with the family who have loved you and cared for you for months. For child welfare professionals and volunteer advocates, foster-adopt care means building on established relationships and preventing unnecessary turbulence and multiple moves for these children.

When courts terminate the rights of parents, the foster-adopt model shortens the remaining time the children must spend under the jurisdiction of those courts by eliminating two time-consuming requirements: the search for a new adoptive family and the minimum span of time children must spend with their new family before the adoption may be finalized. While this reduction in time is important for all children, it is especially important for infants, who are forming vital attachments to their caregivers—key building blocks of healthy development. With foster-adopt care, if children are not able to return home, these attachments need not be broken in order to find permanence.

As CASA volunteers and staff, we can advance the important role of foster-adopt care by advocating for our children to have foster-adopt placement while the court decides what will happen next. Promoting foster-adopt care allows us to support the reasonable efforts made to reunify families while also advocating for the loving new connections required if those efforts are unsuccessful.

CASA programs coordinate with other groups to improve services and to advocate for change in conditions that adversely affect the children we serve. Our efforts span the full range of permanency options, from family reunification to permanent placement with kin to adoption. Although we always hope that children can return home, promoting foster-adopt care is our best chance to help make the system work better for children who cannot. As we venture out to tell our communities about child abuse and the work of Court Appointed Special Advocates, we can provide information about the need for loving foster-adopt homes. The most powerful way to do so is to share, in a manner that protects confidentiality, the stories of individual children finding permanence through foster-adopt placement.
Another excellent opportunity for CASA programs is to support National Adoption Day. By getting involved in its planning and implementation in your jurisdiction, you help remove barriers to adoption and increase public awareness of the many children waiting for their forever families.

As CASA organizations, we have only one agenda: safe, permanent homes for children. When children we serve are unable to return safely to their families of origin, foster-adopt care provides the happy new beginning that all children deserve.
Natasha asked that her photo not be published.

Natasha Santos, 21, was sponsored by National CASA to serve as one of 12 FosterClub All-Stars traveling the country to raise awareness of the issues of youth in care. To learn more, visit fosterclub.com. Natasha is a freelance writer in her third year of college. Her writing has appeared in Represent, City Limits, the New York Daily News and New Youth Connections.

Youth Editorial

On Telling Secrets

Natasha Santos

It was our secret. He and I were bound together by confidential caresses made with his furtive fingers. The summers I spent with him and my aunt weren’t all that unpleasant. They didn’t have children, so every summer they gathered me and my meager things to spend the hot and sunny school-less months on their couch in Virginia. A part of me enjoyed the remoteness and isolation. Quiet moments alone in the grass—and the endless attention lavished on me for being the lone child—weren’t things I got during the school year, when I was living with my biological mother and my 10 brothers and sisters in the projects. A part of me enjoyed having something that couldn’t be shared or told to anyone else. Just a secret for two. And another part of me felt dirty.

It never occurred to me to tell anyone what was going on. It wasn’t due to some childhood naïveté. Growing up on the streets of New York City in the crack-addled apartments of Queens, I was far from naïve. I knew that a lot of bad things could happen if I ever told anyone, but that’s not why I kept it a secret. He made me promise, and “a promise,” he told me, “is a very serious thing.” We shook on it, and he kissed me on the forehead and told me how “special” I was.

But one night my aunt crept into the living room and quietly roused me, handing me the beer she had in her hand and letting me take a sip. I knew the drill; she had done this last summer. “What did he do to you?” she asked in earnest—fear, worry and guilt clouding her face. “I don’t know,” I said. Because I had promised, and even if I hadn’t I didn’t have the words to express how my “uncle’s” hands had been exploring my body. “It’s okay,” she said in a voice that was meant to convey calm and command but cracked a little as she spoke, which only alarmed me more. “Just tell me, what did he do to you?” “I don’t know,” I said in confusion, anger and guilt. I was kind of lying and
you're not supposed to lie, my dad had told me once. But what did he know? He was away in jail for the next six years and could do nothing to help me. She eventually gave up her questioning, after making me promise that I would never be alone with him again.

That was the last summer I spent in Virginia. My mother moved me and five of my siblings to another decaying housing project in Coney Island, Brooklyn. We were taken into foster care about 10 months later. Physical exams and psychological profiles revealed what had been taking place for quite some time during my summers in Virginia. But I wouldn’t admit to anything because I had made a promise to one of the only people who had ever made me feel special.

The entire experience was ultimately filed away into my subconscious, repressed until I was about 16 and began having nightmares and flashbacks. I’d find myself sitting stoically in therapists’ offices and doctors’ examination rooms, looking into searching eyes and confused expressions, just refusing to answer their knowing questions.

At that point, I had the words and understanding that come with age, but I didn’t have confidence or trust in the people deemed worthy to “protect” me. Experiences within the judicial, mental health and foster care systems made me cynical about these people. But my story has come out. In bits and pieces with people I trust, with people I find who have gone through similar experiences and with great editors who have let me write down a piece of my soul on the page to be reprinted and shared.

I was adopted when I was 16, by an amazing family. They took a chance on this quirky “American Girl” (they’re Jamaican) and have loved me fiercely, through all the craziness—and trust me, there has been a lot of craziness. I’ve been one of the few thousand teens a year lucky enough to find permanency through adoption. Having that stability has made me feel more secure and brave.

I think that now it’s time for me to tell my secret, in its entirety. I’m not expecting retribution or a feeling of completion. Just the knowledge that the secret is out there—and that the little girl I was knows that she is special to so many other people in so many other ways.
Rita L. Soronen has served as executive director of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption since 2001. Immediately prior to joining the Foundation, she led CASA of Franklin County in Columbus, OH. During her tenure there, Soronen was selected as the national Kappa Alpha Theta CASA Program Director of the Year. For her full bio and affiliations, visit the Foundation’s website. Learn more about the Dave Thomas Foundation.

Related Resources
- Foster Care Adoption Resources
- Adoption Trends

Special Features & Profiles

Foster Care Adoption: America's Waiting Children

Rita L. Soronen
Executive Director
Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption

One Family's Story

Pam and Joe Kaehler didn’t always plan to have children. They led busy lives in Morgantown, WV, where Pam is a health care administrator, Joe manages a community theatre and both serve on the boards of local nonprofits. They had not thought much about raising a family; as Pam put it, "Kids? I don’t think so. No time, money, energy, confidence or square footage."

Yet they always felt a deep sense of responsibility for helping and serving others. In 2002, Pam was accepted into a civic and leadership development program which included a social services session that exposed the class to a variety of issues, including child abuse and neglect. The subject touched Pam’s heart, and she contacted the department of health and human resources (known in many locales as child protective services) for information. Nine months and many classes, inspections and interviews later, the Kaehlers were certified as foster/adoptive parents and matched with 6-year-old Patrick. The parental rights of his birthmother were under appeal, and he needed immediate placement. The Kaehlers welcomed Patrick into their home as a foster and possibly adoptive placement in August 2004.

"Quite simply, parenting Patrick challenged, strengthened and softened us unimaginably," Pam notes. “So when we were called in November 2005 about an unrelated pair of beautiful siblings—Zack and Alexzandra, ages 8 and 10—we were apprehensive, but we could not say no.” Zack and Alex were placed in the home in December, and Patrick’s adoption was finalized in January. Pam adds, “So we went from zero to three in just over a year’s time!”
Dave Thomas, founder of Wendy’s and a recognizable national icon, was adopted. As a successful businessman with a deep personal commitment to give back to the community, he created the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption in 1992 to dramatically increase adoptions of children from foster care. He frequently noted, “These children are not someone else’s responsibility. They are our responsibility.” The Kaehlers responded to his call to action. But 123,000 children continue to wait for a family like the Kaehlers to step forward and adopt.

**America’s Waiting Children**

When children are permanently removed from their families, we make what should be an unbreakable promise—that we will quickly find an adoptive family for them. Embedded in that promise is that we will find a family that cherishes their childhood, recognizes the challenges that have coincided with their movement into foster care and responds appropriately to their developmental needs. This is critical so that children can grow and thrive while obtaining their birthright—a safe and secure family of their own.

Yet each year in this country, more children in the foster care system are freed for adoption than leave it to adoptive families. In 2008, while 55,000 children were adopted from public child welfare systems, another 75,000 were legally freed but not adopted. (For sources of all adoption statistics, see “Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System” in the Resources sidebar.) And even with decades of groundbreaking federal and state legislation and an increase in adoption incentives awarded to states, challenges within the very systems created to move children into homes often keep them in transient care.

Children in foster care waiting to be adopted have been there an average of 24 months after their parents’ rights are legally terminated, and that is in addition to the months leading up to that point. Many children wait five years or more. Too many are separated from their siblings, and 20%—last year more than 20,000 children—experience their 18th birthday while in foster care and then leave the system without a family of their own. The consequences of youth aging out of care are well documented. According to the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative (See Resources sidebar):

- While 13% of the general population neither graduate from high school nor receive a GED by age 21, that figure is 25% for youth aging out of foster care.
- 71% of females aging out of foster care become pregnant at least once before age 21, while this is true for only 34% of the general population.
- Males in foster care are four times more likely to have been arrested than a comparison group, while females are nearly ten times as likely to have been arrested.

The differences in outcomes result in costs to individuals and to society related to welfare, Medicaid, incarceration and lost wages, among others. The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative estimates that “the outcome differences between youth aging out of [foster care] and the general population is nearly $5,700,000,000 for each annual cohort of youth leaving care.”

**Challenge: The Agency and Court Process**

The stages of the child welfare system—from entry to termination of parental rights (TPR) and adoption—make up a complex legal and social services route through which children and families must navigate. At every stage, child welfare agencies and the courts work in tandem for the best interests of the children through hearings, service provision, appeals, termination of parental rights and adoption finalization. The chart below highlights the key steps in the foster care adoption process:
Barriers and challenges, even in the most efficient of agencies or courts, can delay moving a child through each stage from foster care to adoptive home. In many states, for example, courts are reluctant to terminate parental rights until a family resource is identified and must exhaust all legal appeals prior to termination. Additionally, in most jurisdictions across the nation, agencies are challenged to find families willing to adopt special needs children (that is, children in sibling groups, older children and children with emotional/physical challenges or disabilities). It can also be difficult to find homes that reflect the diversity of the children waiting. Additionally, many families are reluctant to tackle the complicated systems inherent in the process. Particularly as state budgets are radically diminished, agencies struggle with administrative issues of staff training and turnover, caseload management and accountable recordkeeping.

**Challenge: Recruitment Myths and Misperceptions**

Adding to the system challenges are the myriad myths and misperceptions that surround children and the systems in which they reside, resulting in a child welfare landscape that may cause potential adoptive families to self-select out of the process—or keep adoption professionals from actively matching some children with families. Some common misperceptions about foster care adoption include:

1. **It is too expensive to adopt.** In reality, foster care adoption is not expensive—typically averaging $0 to $1,500—and financial support is available to families who adopt from foster care. Subsidies follow most of the children in foster care until they are 18 years old; many employers provide adoption benefits; federal and state tax credits are available; and assistance for college expenses of older youth is available.
Children in foster care are juvenile delinquents. Nothing could be further from the truth. Children enter the foster care system through no fault of their own and as a result of abuse, neglect or abandonment. More than half of the children waiting in foster care for adoptive homes are age 7 or older, and nearly 30% are age 12 or older. Unfortunately, each year about 20% of the children waiting to be adopted turn 18 and leave the system without a family. These new adults are at risk of falling into poverty, homelessness or even the criminal justice system without the supports needed to thrive.

The biological parents can fight to have the children returned. Once a child has been made legally free for adoption, birthparents cannot claim a child or petition for their return. Foster care adoption is permanent. The adoptive parents may decide to maintain contact with the child’s extended biological family, based on what is best for the child, but that is a choice of the adoptive family.

Single individuals cannot adopt. Unmarried individuals are legally able to adopt in all 50 states. Nearly 30% of the children adopted from foster care last year were adopted by single parents.

Source: National Foster Care Adoption Attitudes Survey, November 2007; Harris Interactive, commissioned by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption

CASA Volunteers Are Key When Parental Rights Must Be Terminated

As children make their journey through the foster care adoption system, CASA volunteers can provide a consistent, knowledgeable and indefatigable voice on their behalf. Termination of parental rights does not end the need for CASA advocacy but rather elevates its importance in ensuring permanence for children.

Zack and Alex had been in foster care for almost two years when the Kaehlers met them. Their experience as foster children was both typical and turbulent, with multiple placements and long periods of sibling separation.

"They were very fortunate to have been assigned a CASA volunteer," Pam says. "This relationship provided a loving continuity throughout ‘being foster’ that was largely absent otherwise."

The Kaehlers note that Anne Christopher, who volunteers with the CASA for Kids program in Morgantown, visited the children regularly regardless of the geography of their placement. "Anne remembered their school concerts and their birthdays, and it was obvious that the best interests of the children were her utmost concern," says Joe. "She was always professional but warmly personal as well." As foster/adoptive parents, the Kaehlers were impressed that Anne took the time to get to know the children, their histories, their foster families and the professionals involved in their care and treatment. They feel that this is what made her a credible advocate in her communications to the court.

Pam says that Anne "was as much a resource and support to Joe and me, as new and oftentimes overwhelmed parents, as she was to Zack, Alex and yes, Patrick. She helped us understand complex behaviors and educated us about legal procedures."

The admiration and respect are mutual. "The Kaehlers provided these children with exactly what they needed," says Anne. "Joe and Pam had empathy for all that these young children had been through, and they showed them consistent, unconditional love. But at the same time, they held the children accountable for their actions and taught them about respecting others. Consistency—in love and discipline—was something that calmed the fears that their previously chaotic lives had created."

Before arriving at the Kaehler household, the siblings were living separately. "But I knew in my heart—based upon all of the information I had gathered about them and all the time I had spent with them—that these children needed to be together," says Anne. "So we had to look for a home that was best for both of them."

As is sometimes the case for CASA/GAL volunteers, one challenge for Anne was negotiating between what the children said they wanted and what was in their best interest. "What’s best may not necessarily be what they ask for at the time," notes Anne. "You have to look down the road and try to envision what will be right for them in the future. Those are never easy decisions. Every time you move a child, you do something to a child. I wanted to make sure that this move was the best and last move for these children, and it was."

The Result

Today, the Kaehler family includes Alex (15), Zack (13), Patrick (11) and Miah (10). Miah joined the family in May 2009 as an adoptive placement; the Kaehlers expect to finalize her adoption in February 2010. The Kaehlers’ experience of the foster care adoption process, even with the challenges and barriers encountered, provides an example useful to adoption professionals, potential adoptive parents and CASA volunteers.

"Adopting through foster care is one of the most amazing, gratifying ways to bring about positive change in the world," says Pam. As she sees it, children who come into foster care are overflowing with needs, many of them quite basic. "We discovered that our willingness and our training provided most of what we needed to know. The rest we figured out through old fashioned trial and error or learned from the
many support systems surrounding us.” These systems included the children’s social workers, adoptive “home finder” and of course their CASA volunteer. “We have felt many things along the journey, but we’ve never felt alone,” adds Pam.

Joe feels that foster care adoption brings to parents deep and lasting personal change. “Helping children find meaning in their journey and developing our own compassion for their troubled biological families—these have been significant emotional and spiritual challenges that have changed us immeasurably for the better,” he says.

All but the youngest children in care bring memories and life experience to the table. Older children will refer to their biological parents and have strong recall of past events. Rather than finding this threatening, Pam says, “We find it fascinating to weave the past with the present to the true benefit of the whole family. We have always reinforced to our children that their past has no bearing on their capacity to love those in their present or future.”

Joe is gratified when the children tell him about the “best parts” of being in the family. “They say, ‘The fact that you know there is no chance of ever having to be moved from home to home again,’ ‘Being with a family that has pets and loves me,’ and ‘Knowing that I won’t be thrown around anymore, they love me, and I’m safe.’ What can be better than that?”

With a smile in her voice, Pam Kaehler emphasizes, “Our schedules are hectic, the laundry is endless, and we certainly have our day-to-day challenges, but, as I write this, Joe is singing hit 1980s rock songs badly and loudly, and the kids are in hysterics, begging him to stop. Certainly, we still do not have ‘enough’ money, time, energy, confidence or square footage—who does? But we can and do make it happen for our fantastic family.”

Comments:

Anonymous @ 4/20/2010 9:52:51 AM
I want the Connection magazine to go back to be printed material.

Anonymous @ 2/25/2010 7:40:13 PM
I am currently helping a family on four special needs children transisition from a parental termination through a Foster/Adopt family. Their new FAMILY has proven that two of the children are not special needs but seriously neglected. The have caught up to their age appropriate levels. The other two do have physical problems and are overcoming those problems with medical treatment and proper nurturing. Two years ago when I met these kids, I cried on the way home due to their unecessary problems caused by severe neglect. Now I get teary eyed to see them do so well. The credit goes to the Fos/Adopt parents but this CASA helped keep the children connected with the Case workers as they changed and earned their trust to help them through each step if the way. WE are needed and do serve a purpose in each persons involved with each case.

John Sprague
CASA

Anonymous @ 2/25/2010 11:56:55 AM
I am proud to say that I know both Joe and Pam Kaehler and they are the epitome of what great parents should be. Who could have imagined that two people, that weren’t even considering having children, could have such a huge impact on 4 children - their children. These children are truly blessed because they have the cream of the crop - two parents who want whats best for them, no matter what the cost is or how big the challenge might be. Pam and Joe really are committed to making their childrens’ lives better than even they could ever have imagined. My heroes!!

Anonymous @ 2/24/2010 6:09:49 PM
I adopted ( as a single parent) 3 little boys whom I had fostered. From the time they arrived in my home to the adoption was 2 1/2 years. They were barely 3, 2 and 6 1/2 months old. Now MY boys are 7, almost 6 and 4 years old. It is chaotic, laundry is endless, and I love my life. I don’t remember what is like to be single anymore. Only my oldest has a few memories of life before me. Some of his memories are enough to tear out your heart and I am trying to replace them with loving ones. There were a few behavioral issues, but they had all been born to a drug addicted mother, and few a few health issues. I would not have it any other way.

Anonymous @ 2/24/2010 4:37:48 PM
Thank you to the commenters, Joe and I appreciate all points of view very much and were beyond honored to be considered for this story. Thank you again for your interest in CASA !!

Pam and Joe Kaehler

Anonymous @ 2/24/2010 11:26:55 AM
Sharing stories like this help confirm the power and importance in our CASA Program. I think it is so important to focus on the positive of each story and not the negative. Life is to short not to share wonderful stories as shared above. Well written article and appreciate the simplicity and honesty of the family and there gifts of love.

Anonymous @ 2/24/2010 10:38:30 AM
I am a GAL that is just wrapping up a case where the precious child is going to be adopted by her foster parents after 18 months of the reunification process with the maternal mother. The maternal mother finally voluntarily signed the TPR paper. Don't ever give up if you know what is right for the child. The GAL/CASAs are truly the voices of these needful children.

Anonymous @ 2/24/2010 10:19:21 AM
Wonderful story! Thanks to the Kaehler family for opening their home and hearts to these children! Thanks to CASA for Kids being such a wonderful program! It is truly an honor to work for CASA in West Virginia!

Anonymous @ 2/24/2010 5:25:22 AM
I am so proud of you. The world needs more people like you.

Anonymous @ 2/24/2010 5:21:52 AM
I completely understand what you are saying about "removed", but keep in mind that the term is as hard as the situation is to the children. These children are in an abusive environment beyond what most of us can comprehend, and to them it is normal, and they are taken from these horrific situations kicking and screaming because this is all they know and it is home, no matter how unhealthy.
Softening the verbage to be "politically correct" only satisfies the abuser not the abused.

Joe Kaehler

Add your comments:

Please enter the text from the image

Add Your Comments

Your comments will not be posted until they have been approved by the moderator.
Top Tips for Volunteers

Five Ways to Promote Adoption

Hon. Michael Nash
Los Angeles Superior Court, CA
2006 National CASA Judge of the Year

For 20 years, I have been fortunate to work in a juvenile dependency court with an active and vibrant CASA program. Our program in Los Angeles has been in existence since 1978 and has helped thousands of children in many different ways. One of the areas in which the assistance of a CASA volunteer has been most helpful is adoption.

For most children and families who enter our child protection system, the plan is family reunification. Unfortunately, due to a variety of circumstances, family reunification does not always occur. In those cases, we must develop a different permanent plan. After all, every child is entitled to grow up in a healthy, safe, loving and permanent home. The best way to ensure that when family reunification fails is through adoption. In fact, next to reunification, the preferred permanent plan under the law is adoption. In Los Angeles, we have completed 25,000 adoptions for children from our foster care system since 1998, helping reduce the number of children under our dependency court’s jurisdiction from more than 53,000 to fewer than 24,500.

Over the years, we have seen CASA volunteers impact adoptions in five key ways:

1. Review the File Thoroughly.

One of the first tasks the CASA volunteer must undertake is to review the court file as thoroughly as possible. A case in point is one where CASA volunteers, a husband-and-wife team, were enlisted to advocate for a child who was dying of AIDS. Working with the child’s social worker, attorney and doctors, they helped obtain what was considered an experimental treatment which helped prolong the child’s life. If that weren’t enough, in reviewing the file, the CASA volunteers located a previous prospective adoptive parent who had been discouraged from adopting because of the child’s illness. With support from the CASA team, that relationship was renewed, and the child was adopted.

2. Get to Know Everyone Involved in the Child’s Life.

CASA volunteers, in the normal course of their duties, have the opportunity to know everyone who touches the life of a child. When that happens—and when individuals understand the unique role of advocacy in children’s lives—it often opens doors. During a visit to a child’s school, one of our volunteers was asked to meet with the school principal, who shyly inquired whether the child was available for adoption. It turned out that the principal was interested, and she did adopt the child, who has had a very happy life ever since.
3. Improve a Child’s Stability.

How many times have CASA volunteers been asked to step in because the system seems to be failing and a child’s emotional state is spiraling downward? And how many children are losing out on placements with families, being considered “unadoptable”? Time after time, we have seen children become more amenable to services such as counseling after CASA volunteers gain their confidence. When that happens, doors begin to open for that child, including doors of potential adoptive homes.


The adoption process is often a complicated maze of paperwork for those going through it. Too often adoptions are delayed because some necessary document is missing. One of the luxuries that CASA volunteers have is a small caseload, usually one and seldom more than a couple. Our social workers and attorneys never have the luxury of a small caseload, which is one of the reasons there are so many cracks in the system that CASA volunteers help fill.

In Los Angeles, we had a case where our child protection department tried unsuccessfully for three years to obtain a birth certificate for a child whose foster family was waiting to adopt. Finally, the court requested CASA involvement. Like a detective, the CASA volunteer pursued a trail through hospitals, including a defunct one, child welfare agencies, the delivering obstetrician and others. Within six weeks, the CASA volunteer had a “delayed registration of birth” in hand, and the adoption was completed without any further delay.

5. Serve as an Extra Set of Eyes.

One of the great benefits of having a CASA volunteer on a case is that it adds an extra set of eyes and ears observing how the child is doing and reporting to the court. In the adoption arena, CASA volunteers continuously provide information on the suitability of placements and children’s adjustment to placements. Further, CASA volunteers often provide information on a child’s relationship with his or her birth family, information which is critical to the court making a decision in the child’s best interest.

As a long-time judge in the nation’s largest juvenile court, I know I speak for my colleagues in expressing our deepest appreciation for the help CASA volunteers provide to our children—and to those of us who must make so many critical decisions, especially those impacting permanence, for the children before us.
Association News

Fraternity Brings Energy to CASA Programs Across US

The men of the Omega Delta Phi fraternity (OD Phi) like to challenge the traditional perception of fraternities. For these young people, public service is the top priority. “We provide a social outlet for our brothers, but community service comes first,” says Ivan Jaime, director of national programs for OD Phi and a 2005 alumnus of the University of Texas, Austin.

In August, OD Phi announced its selection of National CASA as its national philanthropic and service partner. With more than 45 undergraduate chapters in 13 states and alumni groups in 5 states—and more chapters coming online every year—the OD Phi network is well positioned to help local programs. The partnership is already taking root across the US. For instance, in Albuquerque, NM, the men of OD Phi at the University of New Mexico (UNM) are bringing their considerable energy, talent and intellect to their local CASA program.

Shortly after school started last fall, Juan Dorado, president of the OD Phi chapter at UNM, invited to campus Susan McDonald, director of Bernalillo County CASA. The CASA mission “caught fire with our chapter,” says Dorado. “We wanted to put our time and effort into this.”

OD Phi brothers came out in force to volunteer at a National Adoption Day event at Albuquerque’s Second Judicial Court in November. They delivered documents, popped popcorn and handed out balloons to many of the 69 children waiting for their adoptions to be finalized; one brother even donned a gingerbread man costume to entertain the children while they waited.

Dorado says he was overwhelmed by the sheer number of children and youth adopted into “forever families” that day. The brothers immediately started planning their next action: Cosas for Kids (cosa is Spanish for “things”), a competition among fraternities and sororities to collect hygiene items for children in care. They collected 600 items, which the CASA program distributed in Christmas stockings in December.

“These guys came on board ready to move,” says McDonald. “They want to participate in something that has meaning, and they’re totally focused on how to help.”
Jorge Garcia is national OD Phi president. "Many of our brothers are first-generation college students, and the vast majority of them are men of color," says Garcia. "They come from every walk of life, and a number of them are no strangers to a rough childhood."

Dorado and McDonald say that OD Phi and Bernalillo County CASA have clicked and that the partnership has immense potential. "These kids want to think big—that's their mission," says McDonald.

Dorado is already planning his future with the CASA program. "When I get a bit older and established, I want to be a CASA volunteer." That depth of commitment bodes well for the future of the OD Phi-National CASA partnership. And it bodes well for the abused and neglected children for whom our volunteers provide a voice.

Results of the 2009 Connection Reader Survey

Thank you to nearly 600 readers of The Connection who took the time to complete last fall’s online survey. You have helped us better understand how well our national magazine works for you and how we can continue to make it better. The results of this poll have been closely read by the National CASA Communications Department to guide our future direction. Survey highlights:

- The majority of readers surveyed indicated that reading The Connection helps them to feel better informed about child welfare issues (average rating 3.83 out of 4) and more connected to a national cause (3.84 out of 4).
- The only change readers asked for in significant numbers is even more factual content related to volunteer advocacy for foster youth.
- Sections of the magazine that received the highest ratings were "Top Tips for Volunteers," the in-depth cover stories on topics affecting foster youth and "Volunteer Voice."
- Other highly rated features include editorials from youth and from experts in child welfare.
- The top four topics readers would most like to see covered more are youth aging out of foster care, family preservation/reunification, child resilience and mental health.
- Among topics that have not yet been covered in depth in the magazine, adoption and domestic violence stood out.

Survey respondents were given the option of entering a drawing for a $50 gift certificate to ShopCASA. Winners were Kim Garner of Grapevine, TX, Wendy Larenn of Mason City, IA, and Kassandra Wheeler of Mt. Shasta, CA.

Our editorial staff thanks all readers who participated in the survey. You will see the results of your feedback in upcoming editions of the publication, starting with the feature article about adoption in this issue. Other topics to be covered in-depth in 2010 are domestic violence and the issues facing older youth in care. We always appreciate your comments. Please provide your thoughts on the publication by completing the survey on the Connection home page.

Complete Results of The Connection Reader Survey: [2009_Survey_Summary](#) (PDF, 202KB)
Trends in Advocacy

To Remove or Not to Remove: Number Trends in Local Child Welfare Systems

As you may have read recently, the Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect found a 26% decline in the overall rate of maltreatment of children, including declines in physical and sexual abuse. Nothing could be more satisfying than to see the need for CASA/GAL advocacy eliminated through the eradication of all forms of maltreatment of children. Nonetheless, more than 1.25 million children in the US were abused or neglected during the study year (2005-2006), and more than 750,000 children each year continue to live under the care and protection of the state. The positive trend demonstrated by the new research may also be affected by the current recession, which began after the study period.

In addition to looking at national trends, it is important to consider what is happening in local and statewide child welfare systems. Many jurisdictions are making a concentrated effort to lower the number of children removed from their homes and placed in foster care as a result of abuse or neglect. A variety of factors are influencing this trend, from federally mandated Child and Family Services Reviews in each state to declining family services budgets at the state and county levels.

Lowering removals is an honorable goal, assuming that children are kept safe and parents are receiving necessary services. But how is this playing out in local jurisdictions? Some CASA programs are seeing numbers of children in care dropping dramatically. Children living at home may still be overseen by family court and require services. Other programs face growing caseloads as numbers of children in foster care grow. Below are perspectives offered by two local CASA program directors from opposite ends of this spectrum.

Indianapolis’s Growing Numbers of Children in Care

Cynthia K. Booth, Esq.
Executive Director
Child Advocates, Inc.
Indianapolis, IN

In 2004, Indiana’s newly elected governor, Mitch Daniels, promised a sweeping reform of the state’s child welfare department. Governor Daniels and the Indiana legislature directed an unprecedented (and probably enviable to other states) level of funding to this reform. The reform added hundreds of case managers over a period of several years to decrease caseloads, introduced the use of child and family team meetings and endeavored to introduce principles of respect, communication and empowerment. Leading this reform at the Indiana Department of Child Services (DCS) was Judge James Payne, the former juvenile court judge from Indianapolis.

Although one of the goals of the reform may have been to decrease the number of children in foster care, recent events in my jurisdiction have revealed a dramatic increase in the number of children brought into foster care. The numbers of new Children in Need of Services (CHINS) cases in Indianapolis since the reform began have grown from 1,920 in 2005 to 2,526 in 2008. Note that there was a 66% increase in children assigned to CHINS in 2008, and preliminary numbers from 2009 indicate that the numbers of children entering foster care are not diminishing.

What caused the increase? Many of us in the system are trying to determine the answer to that question. The Honorable Marilyn A. Moores, presiding judge for the Juvenile Court in Indianapolis, is leading the welfare community in reviewing the increase to understand what is happening in our community. Our local CASA program participates in a multidisciplinary committee created by the Department of Child Services to determine trends or reasons for the increase.

Judge Moores indicated to me that she believes that the downturn in the economy has had an impact on the vulnerable in our community, resulting in homelessness among many more parents. In addition, while she perceives the increase in DCS case managers as a positive aspect of the state’s welfare reform, she believes it may have also facilitated the larger numbers of children in care. There has been almost a self-fulfilling prophecy: If you build it, they will come. From Judge Moores’s perspective, Governor Daniels provided the necessary tools
and resources for Indiana’s child welfare system to respond appropriately and fully to protect children. Judge Moores summarized her opinion of the welfare reform in Indiana, “To Governor Daniels’ credit, he put kids first.”

Jennifer Hubartt, director of DCS for our county, indicated to me that she believes preliminarily that the increase is due in part to the increased number of case managers serving families and to a recent change in the law that eliminated one of two less intrusive, pre-CHINS options for DCS. Prior to 2007, a service referral agreement, featuring services that were monitored by DCS but not the court, could be offered to parents. Now, parents will either have a court-monitored agreement for services or an actual CHINS proceeding.

I believe that all of these reasons play a part in the increasing number of children brought into the system. Another possible factor was the implementation of a new DCS domestic violence protocol for children who have been part of or witnessed domestic violence incidents. Additionally, a more emotional, subconscious reason that may have affected investigatory decision-making was the tragic death in 2007 of one of our foster children who was killed by her mother’s boyfriend during a return to her mother’s care. This child’s death was a horrible reminder that our system’s decisions hold the lives of children in the balance.

Whatever the reasons for the increased numbers, the immediate impact on the children who are being brought into care in Indianapolis is undeniable. Adding to the children’s trauma from being brought into the foster care system is the lack of sufficient resources for all children to have advocacy from Child Advocates. In my opinion, there simply is not enough funding for every child to have a statutorily required CASA/GAL volunteer. These children coming into the system will wait for advocacy for the first six to nine months of their cases. Crucial to have advocacy from Child Advocates. In my opinion, there simply is not enough funding for every child to have a statutorily required CASA/GAL volunteer. These children coming into the system will wait for advocacy for the first six to nine months of their cases. Crucial to have advocacy from Child Advocates.

CASA/GAL volunteers persistently seek safe, permanent homes for the abused and neglected children assigned to them. Yet safe and permanent are terms more related to art than science. Safety standards change over time, leading to a corresponding rise or fall in out-of-home placements. Emancipation is now rarely utilized as a permanency option, while guardianship has gained acceptance in some places. Philosophies favoring either foster care or family preservation alternately bring safety or stability to the forefront of public discourse. Within this changing environment, CASA programs and volunteers continually adapt in order to achieve a measure of both safety and permanency for individual children.

In Georgia, child welfare officials have been greatly reducing reliance on foster care by seeking quick routes to permanency for children already in care and alternate solutions for children who in the past might have been placed temporarily outside of the home. This shift marks a significant break from recent history, when Georgia used foster care as the primary safety net for abused and neglected children. During the last 18 months, the number of shelter care hearings in the Tifton Judicial Circuit has dropped from about two a month to an average of one every two months. In three of the four counties we serve, the Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS) has gone almost a year without seeking foster care for any children.

As Georgia’s policy and practice have shifted, our CASA program has sought to respond proactively so that we can continue to offer timely advocacy to as many children as possible. Through the transition, we have learned many lessons that may be helpful to programs in a similar position.

1. **All abused and neglected court-involved children can benefit from CASA advocacy.** Until recently, our program served only children in foster care. As DFCS practice has changed, our juvenile court has begun appointing us to serve children residing at home. For instance, volunteers now serve in (1) family preservation cases in which DFCS has sought to compel parent cooperation through a protective order; (2) requests for immediate transfer of custody in lieu of foster care; and (3) after-care cases during the months immediately following reunification. Our court has also begun ordering DFCS to more frequently accept joint commitment of dependency and juvenile justice clients, leading us for the first time to interact directly with the justice system.

2. **Children with DFCS will likely increase but can be managed.** In earlier times, DFCS personnel and CASA volunteers were often headed toward the same goals, differing only in the desired pace of progress. Now, our recommendations frequently run directly opposite those of DFCS. In some cases, DFCS has attempted to return children to their parents prior to completion of case plan goals; we have opposed these petitions due to a concern that re-abuse seemed likely. We have also opposed petitions for a quick transfer of custody, fearing that the resultant end of reunification services might eliminate a child’s opportunity to grow up safely in the home of his or her parents. Consistent professionalism and courteous disagreement are essential in maintaining relationships and credibility in such circumstances.

3. **Other external and internal tensions may increase for volunteers.** Parents are more likely to feel threatened as we monitor children living at home. Children living at home may be more reluctant to talk openly. In such instances, patience in rapport-building becomes increasingly important. Sometimes CASA volunteers may doubt themselves when their recommendations diverge from those of other professionals. Often, a simple word of encouragement from CASA staff will steady volunteers in their convictions.

4. **Volunteers and staff must work together more closely.** In the current environment, a child’s circumstances can change quickly as DFCS rushes home evaluations, seeks near-immediate implementation of non-reunification plans or moves for reunification prior to completion of all case plan goals. It is essential that the CASA volunteer and supervisor communicate several times a month to ensure a timely response to unexpected twists and turns.

As with any CASA program, we are constantly adjusting to changes in state priorities, policies and practices. In the midst of adaptation, though, we maintain an unwavering commitment to our central hope. No matter their current circumstance, every abused child deserves safety and permanency. In every venue available to us, we will strive to creatively advocate for a great degree of both.
Valarie De La Garza is the president of De La Garza PR, a general and Latino market communications consultancy based in Los Angeles, CA. A passionate volunteer, De La Garza specializes in implementing communications strategies for nonprofit and public sector organizations.

For More Information


*Recruiting and Supporting Latino Volunteers*, B. Hobbs, Extension Specialist, 4-H Youth Development, Oregon State University, 2000

National CASA member programs also have access to materials geared to the Hispanic population, including a bilingual volunteer recruitment brochure, radio public service announcements and the video *Unpacking Hope*.

**6 Tips for Latino Volunteer Recruitment**

**Above and Beyond**

**Embajadores para la Causa (Ambassadors for the Cause): Child Advocates Push for More Hispanic Volunteers**

By Valarie De La Garza

*Leer en español*

In nine years as a guardian ad litem volunteer in Miami-Dade County, FL, Rosi Alvarez has handled 12 cases involving 24 children. Those 24 faces she holds in her mind’s eye are what keep her focused on the serious role she plays in these children’s lives. Most of her cases have involved mental illness and substance abuse. As a former volunteer with youth substance abuse programs, she purposely chose to take on cases that dealt with these issues.

“One of the things the GALs have in common is a sense of indignation of the terrible things we know foster care children have gone through,” Alvarez says. “The other characteristic we share is that we are caretakers.”

Alvarez has applied this heady combination of intensity and innate desire to nurture in her role as a GAL advocate inside the courtroom as well as outside of its walls. She conducts interviews with English- and Spanish-language media about the program’s impact on children’s lives. She creates bilingual flyers in which advocates speak from the heart about the need for volunteers. She talks to people at community and city council meetings about how they can get involved. And during last year’s horrendous budget reductions, Alvarez spearheaded a grassroots letter-writing campaign that was instrumental in lowering state budget cuts to the GAL program from 23% to 8%.
“We simply cannot rely on the news media to get the word out about GAL,” Alvarez says. “As advocates, we must become resourceful in spreading the word ourselves.”

Word-of-mouth volunteer recruitment is critical in the growing Hispanic community. Approximately 19% of children in foster care are Latino (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2009), yet only 4% of CASA or GAL volunteers are Hispanic.

The US Census Bureau projects that by 2050 the Hispanic community will grow from almost 47 million currently to 132.8 million—or 30% of the population. Of the 10.4 million Hispanic households in the US, 62% include a child under the age of 18.

“The greatest barrier to achieving our vision for abused and neglected children is lack of awareness of our cause,” says National CASA CEO Michael Piraino. “Research shows fewer than 5% of adults are aware of the CASA cause. Given the growing number of Latinos in the US, the need for awareness—and bilingual advocates—is especially pressing,” he says.

Capturing details is crucial in the process of serving as an advocate, making bilingual volunteers vital in helping to communicate in Spanish with the child and family—even when interpreters are available. In addition, Latino advocates have an understanding of cultural nuances which can be helpful in handling a case.

Sandra Solis, a volunteer with CASA of Los Angeles for seven years, believes the ability to speak Spanish has been essential in helping her communicate with foster family members. She notes that the majority of her cases represent Latino children from Central and South America who share language nuances as well as cultural traditions and beliefs that differ from the dominant majority of Latinos of Mexican origin in Los Angeles. This point demonstrates the need for a diverse Latino volunteer base.

Solis is also a living testament to the power of personal persuasion. In addition to speaking at recruitment rallies at universities and at volunteer orientations, she looks for nontraditional ways to spread the word. Every year, Solis shares her experiences in a Christmas letter to friends and family.

Volunteer Rosi Alvarez of Miami has called upon her own insights into Hispanic culture in her personal efforts to recruit volunteers and raise awareness of the program. In the letters she has created for Hispanic outreach, she uses the notion of family as a touchstone in her pitch for involvement.

This photo of Valarie De La Garza is from National CASA’s 2007 photo gallery, which is available to member programs for use in their communications materials.

“We can best engage Hispanics by getting to their hearts about how a child being in foster care affects the family,” she says.

Many Latinos who use English as their primary language still value organizations that do outreach in Spanish, which demonstrates sincerity in reaching Latinos. Research on Hispanic volunteerism recommends that nonprofit organizations interested in boosting Latino recruitment demonstrate cultural competence as well as long-term commitment to the community. (Learn more from the publications listed at right.)

Solis has experienced how cultural competence comes into play as a Latina advocate. When the children of one of her cases were placed in the system after their mother died, the father’s whereabouts were unknown. Solis discovered that the family was indeed in touch with the father. As an illegal immigrant, he was worried about potential deportation as a result of stepping forward to care for his children.

“They are afraid of government agencies and are misinformed about what can happen to them if they are not legal. We can explain the process in Spanish,” Solis says. “We can help them understand that we are here to help them, not to lay a trap.”

This example illustrates one of the most important aspects of outreach to Latinos—establishing credibility. Hispanics have a long tradition of informal volunteerism and philanthropy such as pitching in to help their families, churches and communities in times of need. Compared to other populations, however, low numbers of Latinos participate in formal volunteerism such as CASA advocacy.

While numerous theories exist on the gap between the heritage of generosity of time and resources in informal vs. formal settings, research indicates that one of the most important ways to attract Hispanics as volunteers is fielding credible messengers. Whether in television ads, online or face-to-face in the community, Latino peers are the best ambassadors for recruitment.

As Rosi Alvarez puts it, “You are the best representative of what you espouse.”
Related Reading

**Flux: Life After Foster Care**

By Leigh Ecke, Misty Stenslie et al.; published by Foster Care Alumni of America, 2009, 103 pages

There are nearly 200,000 youth 13 years of age and older in the foster care system, and more than 25,000 young people age out of care each year without having a forever family of their own. To help these youth, Foster Care Alumni of America released *FLUX: Life After Foster Care*, a book in which more than 100 foster care alumni guide youth through the emotional journey to adulthood. It explores transitional issues such as finding and developing the youth’s unique identity, creating support systems, dealing with biological families, developing close bonds with others and addressing parenting issues. Instead of advocating one right way to do things, each chapter shares the experiences of adults who have been there. The authors encourage the next generation of young people facing transition to examine the issues and develop a personal means of finding their way in the world.

**Book Club**

**Growing Up in the Care of Strangers: The Experiences, Insights and Recommendation of Eleven Former Foster Kids**

By Waln K. Brown and John R. Seita; published by the William Gladden Foundation Press, 2009, 192 pages

Book review by Patricia Wagner
The cover of this book sends you its first message about our foster care system: a beat-up cardboard box, a garbage bag tied up with a rope, a well loved teddy bear sitting on a tattered welcome mat and the shadow of a child in the background. These have become symbols of children in foster care.

Growing Up in the Care of Strangers is written by 11 adults who share their life experiences of going from abusive homes to foster care to ultimately becoming the successful professionals they are today. All of the writers share the painful memories of the abuse and neglect they endured.

Angelique Day starts her chapter, “Like so many American kids reared by abusive and neglectful parents, I did not know the simple joys of childhood, nor was I permitted the normalcy of a stable family life. By my ninth birthday, I had heard about the ‘Great American Dream,’ and although I wanted to believe in it—desperately—it was nothing more than a little girl’s wistful fantasy. In my world, nightmares dominated dreams, and fantasies existed only briefly, extinguished by the daily horrors of cruel reality.”

Each author speaks candidly about the foster care system that became their “legal” parent. While they share their knowledge of the system from a child’s eye view, they also give us their adult perspective. Three messages echoed through each chapter. The first was that no one listened to them—whether it was reporting the abuse, pointing out problems in their foster homes or saying what they wanted or needed. What’s more, no one asked!

Rosalind Folman expressed the second message best. “Foremost, the foster care experience undermines children’s sense of belonging. Belonging is a basic human need that when unmet prevents children from achieving a sense of self-worth…. The repeated disruptions in all their social networks, losing family, friends, classmates and community, lead children to feel as if they belong nowhere.”

The third message clearly articulated youths’ concerns leaving the foster care system with no survival skills. Youth in the child welfare system are well aware of their odds for success once they leave care—but they are rarely provided the necessary tools to make it. These 11 had to find the drive within themselves in order to become the successes they are today.

Maurice Webb concludes his chapter by saying, “Perhaps it is time for the decision-makers to listen to those of us who have survived the system and utilize our input to fix what too long been broken…. By including the voices and insights of survivors…the child welfare system might just advance its mission of helping young people grow past difficult situations by learning from those of us who have surmounted seemingly impossible odds.”

This book is one to be read and taken to heart by all who find themselves in a position to speak for the needs of children in care—whether a CASA volunteer, program staff member, foster care worker, judge or legislator. Our greatest successes will come only when we listen to each child and step up to meet that child’s needs.
New Report on Child Well-Being

America’s Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2009 presents important indicators affecting children’s lives. Developed by the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, the user-friendly report presents data from 2007 gathered by federal agencies on 40 key indicators that characterize the well-being of children and their likelihood of growing to be productive and healthy adults. The indicators are divided among seven categories: family and social environment; economic circumstances; health care; physical environment and safety; behavior; education; and health.

Issue Brief Weighs Benefits and Costs of Extending Foster Care to Age 21

This Chapin Hall issue brief provides preliminary estimates of the potential costs to government and benefits to young people for states that extend foster care to age 21. Researchers project increases in postsecondary educational attainment associated with allowing youth to remain in foster care until they are 21 years old, resulting in greater lifetime earnings. They estimate that lifetime earnings would increase an average of two dollars for every dollar spent on keeping youth in care beyond age 18. This information can be useful for policymakers in light of the passage of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008. Read Extending Foster Care to Age 21: Weighing the Costs to Government Against the Benefits to Youth by Clark M. Peters, Amy Dworsky, Mark E. Courtney and Harold Pollack.

Cultural and Linguistic Competency in the Child Welfare System

Because children of color continue to be overrepresented in child welfare systems, cultural and linguistic competency is an essential guiding principle to support the needs of families. As part of its A Closer Look report series, the National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center recently published an issue dedicated to cultural competency. The report provides examples of strategies for achieving culturally and linguistically proficient child welfare systems by grantees of the Children’s Bureau’s initiative Improving Child Welfare Outcomes Through Systems of Care.

Child Maltreatment Report Released

The Future of Children, a collaboration of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University and the Brookings Institution, has released its latest issue of Preventing Child Maltreatment (vol. 19, no. 2). Contributors examine a gradual shift in the field of child maltreatment toward prevention and explore how insights into risk factors for maltreatment can help target prevention efforts. They assessed whether programs such as community-wide interventions, parenting programs, home-visiting, drug and alcohol treatment and school-based educational programs on sexual abuse can prevent maltreatment. The report also explores how the child protective system might take a more active role in prevention.

Child Policy Forums Now Available on ResearchChannel

Video recordings of three Thursday's Child public policy panel discussions are now available on the ResearchChannel. Cosponsored by the Chapin Hall Center for Children and the Urban Institute, this series focuses on timely issues affecting America's children and youth, their families and communities:

- The Real Costs of Teen Motherhood
- Location, Location, Location: Combating Urban Poverty Through Place-Based Initiatives
Study Presents Framework for Monitoring Local Child Welfare Agencies

In this Chapin Hall report, researchers present a framework that state and local child welfare agencies might use to monitor their return on investments in child welfare services. The study examines the complexities associated with understanding system performance and determining whether the improvements are connected to changes in how resources are invested. Read Finding the Return on Investment: A Framework for Monitoring Local Child Welfare Agencies by Fred Wulczyn, Britany Orlebeke and Jennifer Haight.

Children’s Rights Studies New York City Foster Care System

The Long Road Home: A Study of Children Stranded in New York City Foster Care details the problems that delay the progress of children in New York City foster care toward either reunification with their parents, adoption or permanency through legal guardianship. This new Children’s Rights report also makes concrete recommendations about how these problems can be solved. With the participation of 28 private foster agencies and input and support from many other organizations and individuals, researchers examined the case records of 153 children who have remained in foster care for two years or more despite being slated for reunification with their parents or for adoption. This report’s findings and recommendations provide a roadmap for overcoming the barriers that keep too many children stranded in foster care and speeding progress toward permanency.
Program Spotlight

30 Advocates in 30 Days:
An Inventive Volunteer Recruitment Campaign

Siobhan Greene
Executive Director
CASA of Monterey County
Salinas, CA

As CASA or GAL programs, we’ve all been there…wishing we had more volunteer advocates, knowing we are not meeting all the needs in our communities. This past summer, CASA of Monterey County was going through another round of growing pains. We’d had some staff turnover, and our recruitment efforts were feeling a bit stale. Our list of children awaiting an advocate was growing. Typically our program hosts at least four training sessions a year, and we never want to miss an opportunity to bring on more advocates. But that summer, with fewer inquiries and internal changes, our anticipated training session did not seem to be coming together. So we made the difficult decision to hold off until the fall, when our hiring choices were finalized, staff was properly trained and we had a little more time to recruit prospective advocates.

In early August, I approached the staff with a new idea. Feeling as though we needed a compelling message, I told them I wanted to recruit 30 advocates in 30 days. None of us were sure how we could do that, but we agreed it had a good ring to it. Knowing we needed help, I called on our favorite PR guru Marci Bracco, who does pro-bono work for us, and asked her to work her magic! And so began our campaign.

Marci set about writing press releases and flooded the media. We planned a kick-off event, complete with live music, raffle prizes and a ribbon-cutting hosted by the Salinas Valley Chamber of Commerce. I wanted a button to wear and charged the staff with coming up with ideas for a catchy slogan to attract attention to the campaign. In no time flat, my program manager, Michelle Arnold, thought of “Are You One of the 30?”

The kick-off event took place on September 1 at a local business that has been very generous to our program. Me-N-Ed’s Pizzeria donated the venue, pizza and soft drinks along with a few bottles of wine. One of our board members gathered a few friends and some talented youth, and together they rocked the house with great music. Board members involved in retail or hospitality donated raffle prizes.

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It’s always a little nerve-wracking to throw a party when you aren’t sure who is coming, but by the start time, there was a line of people coming in the door. They were asked to sign in and pick up an information packet in return for a ticket for the raffle prizes. Current advocates, staff and board members were identified to host informal Q&A sessions with our guests. More than 65 people attended, including three judges, chamber members (who gave the campaign its official start) and current volunteers. We had a sign-up sheet for pre-training interviews and held out one raffle prize—a special overnight stay at Chaminade Resort and Spa in Santa Cruz—for those who signed up that evening to schedule an interview.
Staff, board and volunteers wore the “Are You One of the 30?” buttons for the entire month of September. For consistency, we created a cheat sheet for our button-wearers to hand out when someone asked, “The 30 What?” Excitement built as we told each other stories of who asked the question—the teller at the bank, someone at the farmer’s market, a fellow Rotarian, the barista at the local coffee shop and our favorite—the juvenile court judge!

Every print publication in our community ran some kind of news brief on the campaign, including a feature article in the Monterey County Herald. From the press, inquiries were rolling in by the end of August. A total of 45 pre-training interviews were held in September and October. We then hosted two concurrent training sessions in October—one daytime, one evening—to accommodate a total of 37 new recruits. Only three people did not complete the process.

On November 13, we hosted a public swearing-in of our new recruits in our Board of Supervisors’ Chamber. Judges, system partners, staff, board members, family and friends were on hand to congratulate the new trainees, let them know how significant their commitment to children is and assure them we would all be there to support the journey that lay ahead. The Salinas Californian came and took photos for a feature that will run in a future newspaper insert.

With this influx of new advocates, we’re ready to cut our waitlist by almost 40%! It has been so exciting to see these results, we’re already planning an April reprise of the campaign.

It took everyone working together, and my team delivered in grand style. My wish is that other CASA programs will experience the success we have with a similar approach.

Do you have a program innovation to share with Connection readers? We’d love to hear about it! Send an email with a brief summary to theconnection@nationalcasa.org.
Field Notes

World’s Tallest Gingerbread Man

Dane County CASA, Madison, WI

On November 21, the unveiling of the world’s tallest gingerbread man raised funds for and awareness of Dane County CASA in Madison, WI. Created by community member Dave Bowden, with the support of a local construction company and many volunteers, the gingerbread man stood 26 feet tall. Festivities accompanying the unveiling included a gingerbread house decorating competition and public cookie decorating, with cookie-sale proceeds benefiting Dane County CASA.

Pittsburgh Steelers Tailgate Party

CASA of Allegheny County, Pittsburgh, PA

Thanks to longtime CASA volunteer Christine Arians, wife of Steelers’ Offensive Coordinator Bruce Arians, CASA of Allegheny County hosted its 3rd annual Pittsburgh Steelers’ Tailgate Party last October at Heinz Field. Willie Parker, honorary chair, said, “It’s important to do something like this to help out kids. I will do anything for kids to bring a smile to their faces.” This year, the CASA program raised over $30,000, which will go directly to increasing service capacity.

Birthday Party Collects Dolls for CASA Children

CASA of Deep East Texas, Nacogdoches, TX

The morning after the annual And Justice is Served banquet held by CASA of Deep East Texas, Dawna Price told her daughter Emily about the keynote speaker, former youth in care Ashley Rhodes-Courter. “When Emily realized there were little children out there without mommies and daddies, she wanted to do something,” Dawna recalls. So when Emily planned her 7th birthday party, she knew precisely what she wanted: a lot of dolls. They were not for her but for children who were removed from their homes. After her birthday party, Emily donated 45 dolls from the 20 guests. A relative from California, after hearing this news, went on to become a CASA volunteer in San Bernardino. Emily, who says she wants to become a CASA volunteer when she grows up, wrote a thank you note to children who came to her party and gave dolls, saying, “Tomorrow, a little girl will wake up smiling because of you.”
Talia Markham, Miss West Virginia 2009

WV CASA Association, Charleston, WV

CASA volunteer Talia Markham was crowned Miss West Virginia 2009 last June. She initiated her reign by announcing that her platform is breaking the cycle of child abuse and neglect. Markham hopes “to impact the lives of children through my school tour, increase awareness of the Child Protective Services needs legislatively and do my best to recruit more foster families and adoptive homes for those children looking for that ‘forever family.’” Markham got involved in the CASA program because her father, Circuit Judge Thomas Evans, saw the need for an extra opinion in the court room concerning the placement of children that have been abused or neglected.

Wishes Fulfilled for CASA Youth

CASA of Orange County, Santa Ana, CA

CASA of Orange County held its annual holiday luncheon in December, this year featuring Dr. Phil and Robin McGraw as the keynote speakers. The event attracted a record 570 guests and also included a Michael Kors runway fashion show. Former CASA youth Sandy Phan, now 18, powerfully shared her story at the event and then was featured on the Dr. Phil Show the following week. “Our guests were so impressed by Dr. Phil and Robin’s evident passion and commitment to foster youth,” shared Greg Bradbard, executive director. The event attracted many new prospective volunteers and netted $165,000 for the CASA program and to fulfill wishes from children submitted by their advocates.

From left: CASA volunteer Mary Roda, who was instrumental in helping Sandy Phan get into college and launched toward a successful adulthood, Phan, Dr. Phil and Robin McGraw

CASA Program and Symphony in Concert

La Porte County CASA/Harmony House, La Porte, IN

Over each of the past 15 years, LaPorte County CASA/Harmony House has held a fundraiser at a different venue with its own theme. This year, the program invited the LaPorte County Symphony to join them at their annual fundraiser. During the event, chamber groups provided music to entertain the 200 guests who enjoyed food and drink provided by local vendors as well as a raffle for a grand prize basket. In total, the event raised more than $22,000.

Kappa Alpha Theta Support

Parachute: Butler County CASA, Hamilton, OH

Members of Kappa Alpha Theta at Miami University of Oxford, OH, have been busy fundraising to help local abused and neglected children. They presented a check for $1,700 to Parachute: Butler County CASA recently, which will assist with the training and supervision of volunteer advocates. The women’s fraternity also hand-painted tote bags and made journals and puzzles for the program’s children. Executive Director Chris Schultz remarked, “We are so appreciative of the connection with the Thetas. Each year, fraternity members are enthusiastic about raising funds for our CASA program and genuinely interested in assisting the CASA children. Several Thetas have even enrolled in the CASA training and work as CASA advocates after they graduated.”
Caring Friends Play Yard

CASA of Collin County, Inc., McKinney, TX

When CASA of Collin County purchased and moved into a new building in 2008, community volunteers and donors stepped up to ensure that CASA children would have a welcoming space for supervised visitation and therapeutic play. After an estimated 1,000 volunteer hours that included painting structures and the murals for the indoor and outdoor play spaces, the project was completed. The program hosted a dedication to thank JC Penney employees and the more than other 20 community partners who stepped forward to provide funds, labor and materials for this special play area. Susan Etheridge, CASA of Collin County executive director, said, "Without the generosity of JC Penney, 3e McKinney, Grimes Construction, Dr. M. Akram Khan (medical director of the Center for Preventive Medicine & Cardiac Center of Texas) and many others, this would not have been possible."

Awards

GAL volunteer Helen Marotto, a real estate practitioner in Hampstead, NC, was one of five winners chosen by the National Association of Realtors as a Realtor Magazine 2009 Good Neighbor Awards winner. Marotto was selected for her commitment to children in foster care. Inspired to help children after one of her grandchildren survived a rare genetic disorder, she has been a volunteer with the Fifth Judicial District GAL Program in Wilmington, NC, for the past 10 years. Besides winning a $10,000 grant for her program, she was profiled in the November-December 2009 issue of Realtor Magazine. This profile inspired several of her colleagues to become volunteers.

The 2009 Governor’s Lifetime Achievement Service Award was given by West Virginia Governor Joe Manchin to Harrison County CASA volunteer Karen Betler. The award recognizes Betler’s significant contributions to the Mountain State through her volunteer efforts. An advocate for almost 12 years who has served 24 children, Betler has logged more than 9,000 miles and devoted over 3,000 hours of service. According to the program’s director, Charlene Kenney, Betler has also been instrumental in raising awareness around the community by recruiting fellow volunteers and board members, assisting with grant presentations and fundraising: "Our CASA program is stronger and better because of Karen Betler and her belief in our mission."

Palm Beach Mayor Lois Frankel presented Child AbuseWatch’s first-ever Child Advocate of the Year Award to Vicki Tucci, Esq., circuit director of the GAL Program–15th Judicial Circuit, FL. Mayor Frankel spoke about her respect and support of the GAL program and of Tucci’s role in particular. As of November, the GAL program’s 350+ volunteer advocates had represented 2,200 children in 2009. Tucci is a member of the Florida Bar and the Palm Beach County Bar Association and teaches at South University.

Do you have a program success to share with Connection readers? We'd love to hear about it! Send an email with a brief summary to theconnection@nationalcasa.org.
Connection Sightings

Kathmandu, Nepal

Volunteer Betsey Soulsby of Piedmont CASA in Charlottesville, VA, visited Nepal to see her daughter, who was working on a project to establish a library in a government-run school in Kathmandu. Soulsby, shown in the library, wrote that the trip was inspiring on many levels: “I find traveling, domestically and internationally, has similarities to CASA volunteering. Both offer opportunities for learning, reflecting and appreciating the uniqueness and commonalities in all of humanity.”

Soulsby also commented that “the inclusion of CASA volunteers with The Connection in far-flung locations is an interesting addition to the publication. It actually got me started thinking about more local display of the magazine. I place the latest edition of The Connection in the reception area of the dental office where I work. Maybe the exposure will pique some additional interest in our local CASA organization.”

Where do you take The Connection? Send your photo and description to theconnection@nationalcasa.org.
The Honorable Glenda A. Hatchett is a nationally recognized authority on juvenile issues known for her award-winning television series Judge Hatchett and her book Say What You Mean and Mean What You Say! She will provide a keynote address at the next National CASA Annual Conference, which takes place in Atlanta April 16-19, 2010. Learn more about Judge Hatchett at glendahatchett.com.

Closing Words

Follow the Dreampost to Parent Power

Judge Glenda A. Hatchett
National CASA Spokesperson

When my kids were young, I used to put notes in their book bags or tape them to the bathroom mirror. Now that they are older, they get emails and cell phone messages. But before they were old enough to understand, I was saying to them consistently, “I know that you’re destined for greatness.”

For years, I’ve given parents and other influencers of children a piece of homework. And this is something that CASA volunteers can put in motion with support from foster parents. I encourage you to sit down and ask each child, “What is your dream for your life? If you could do anything in the world, what would it be?” Then I ask adults to take a piece of paper and put the name of the dream in bold letters and tack it to the ceiling or over the child’s bed. (For older children, it’s best to let them do the posting.) Astronaut, teacher, musician—whatever it may be. This sign becomes the first thing the child sees in the morning and the last thing she sees at night. And for the child who does not know what he wants to be, simply post “I want to be great.” The specific dream will come to him eventually.

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My new Dreampost Campaign encourages one million parents and other concerned adults to join a movement to promote the dreams of our children. Register at parentpowernow.com, and you can download a free handprint on which to write children’s dreams. Post the dream for every child in your circle, and then invite other parents and influencers of children to join this movement. The website includes several resources to help you begin this conversation.

I’m so happy to have National CASA on board as a dream partner. CASA volunteers are key to supporting this dreaming process in children, whether for the far-off future or the here and now. For example, you might say to a child, “I just know you can make the squad (or the chess team or whatever short-term goal the child might have). And here’s how I can help you get there.” This kind of positive coaching is something all children need and is too often absent in the lives of youth in foster care.

Why are these conversations so important? We know that children who are focused on their dreams are less likely to get sidetracked by distractions like skipping class or using drugs. By asking this critical question—“What is your dream for your life?”—we are sending such an important message to children: that we are listening, that we care and that we believe in them.

As a CASA volunteer, you might find yourself having a conversation with a 15-year-old who against all odds says to you, “I want to be an obstetrician.” Maybe because of where she’s living, the dream doesn’t get posted on the ceiling. But it can be posted on the inside of a closet door or inside her locker—somewhere she sees it every day. And decades from now when she is delivering babies, she will remember the CASA volunteer who believed in her enough to help her dream.
Achieving a dream is not easy work. Neither is being a CASA or GAL volunteer. As someone who has often seen the difference that advocates make in children’s lives, I deeply appreciate what you do to make life better for our children. I encourage you to take care of yourself as well by nurturing your own spirit. As a parent told me, “I’m posting my child’s dream over her bed, and I’m also posting my dream over my own bed. Just because I am not a kid does not mean that I cannot have a dream.”

We won’t be given another chance to get it right for this generation of children. This is work that lives long beyond us, that will manifest itself on generations yet to be born. Thank you for everything you do to keep the dreams alive.