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Big Apple Parent

FamilyLaw

New York City CASA: Taking Kids to Court

By Brette McWhorter Sember

There are 30,000 children in foster care in New York City. Their plight is often unhappy and desperate. But there is a beacon of hope for children who have been abused or neglected by their parents. That beacon is CASA.

Court Appointed Special Advocates is a non-profit organization whose volunteers give their time to make a difference in these children's lives. "The goal of CASA is to move children through the bureaucracy and into safe permanent homes as quickly as possible," explains Amy Feldman, executive director of New York City CASA.

CASA was founded in 1976 when a judge in Seattle felt that child victims of abuse and neglect needed more of a voice in the court proceedings that decided their fate. CASA volunteers are assigned by family court judges to act as an advocate for the child. CASAs meet the child, the parents and caseworkers and also gather information from doctors, teachers, therapists and other professionals. The CASA then makes an assessment as to what is in the best interest of the child, and presents a report to the court which includes his or her recommendation on behalf of the child. The CASA follows the child all the way through the court case and also through the entire length of the foster care stay until the child is in a permanent home (by returning to the parents or through adoption).

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CASA began in New York City in 1979. The program represented 14,500 individual children last year and did so with only about 100 volunteers. The New York City CASA program represents children in all five boroughs. Before being accepted, volunteers are interviewed and provide references. They then attend a 30-hour training program before taking their first case. "Volunteers have, at the minimum, weekly contact with their supervisor," Amy Feldman says. Volunteers handle an average of 10 children per year, and are assigned to their cases by family court judges.

CASAs are often the only stable factor in a case because the CASA is with the child for the duration. When a CASA takes a case, his or her goal is to be an advocate for what is in the best interest of the child. "Best interest is not defined by law and is difficult to define," says Feldman. A CASA must make an independent determination as to what outcome in the case would be best for the child; this may be different from the child's wishes.

CASAs appear in court at all court dates and speak to the court to make a recommendation in the case. "CASAs really know what is going on in a child's life and ferret out information and make the information available to the court," Feldman explains.

"The judge treats me as an important part of the system," says New York City volunteer Norm Gordon.

CASA volunteers help the child have a voice in the proceedings, but they also have the effect of helping the case progress. "Anecdotally, judges have said there are fewer adjournments and the case moves along more quickly if there is a CASA volunteer. The child gets to a permanent situation quicker," Feldman notes.

New York City CASA has a supervisory board of nine professionals and receives most of its funding from the New York State Unified Court System, with additional funding coming from foundations, corporations, other government sources and individuals.

New York City CASA is "always in need of volunteers," according to Feldman. Diversity is a particular concern. Feldman says, "We have a diverse group here in New York City. It's something we work at and continue to work at." Volunteers are asked to commit five hours per week to the program. One stumbling point is the way the court cases are scheduled — often scheduled once every two weeks, with all of the cases before that judge scheduled for 9am, so a volunteer may have to spend an entire day in court, waiting for the case to be called. This makes it difficult for people with full-time jobs to volunteer, thus many New York City CASAs are retirees. "We want to triple our volunteers," Feldman says.

Working as a CASA volunteer can be very rewarding. Norm Gordon says he volunteers because "I hope to make a difference in children's lives."

To find out dates of next scheduled New York City CASA volunteer training programs; or if you would like to volunteer or receive more information, check their website at www.casa-nyc.org, or call (212) 334-4010. ♦