

## CASA volunteers help shoulder burden of child abuse cases

Court Appointed Special Advocates work closely with the court to serve the best interests of the child

### Business News

[Banks Fear Damage of U.S. Debt Default](#)

[In Spite of Shutdown and Potential Debt Default, Investors Stand Pat](#)

[Best Car Loan Option in Today's Economy](#)

### Suggested Stories

[Peoria family tries to deal with latest tragedy](#)

[The Center for the Prevention of Abuse helps...](#)

[District 150 email incident was an 'absurd...](#)

### From the Web

[Mom barges into school office and slaps wrong... theGrio](#)

[Man charged with cooking wife dies USA TODAY](#)

[Michigan Supreme Court Upholds Constitutionality... AARP](#)

[Sponsored content What's this?](#)

The young woman sat next to her lawyer at a table in front of a judge inside the courtroom that contains no jury box. While she mostly knew the outcome of her case in advance, the moment still packed a solid emotional punch and she poked at tears with a tissue bunched around her index finger.

"Good job," a smiling Judge Mark Gilles said after legally returning her two daughters, who had been wards of the state for more than a year, into the custody of their mother. "You got it done."

The woman exited Courtroom 424 in the Peoria County Courthouse and collapsed into one of the gray molded-plastic chairs that line both sides of the fourth floor hallway outside of the Juvenile Abuse and Neglect Court. The tears still came.

"It's a happy ending," said Joe, the CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate) volunteer who represented her children throughout the legal process, and who followed her out of the courtroom. The volunteers interviewed for this story asked that their last names not be used, so that no one could connect them to the details of any single case. "They don't all turn out that way."

Actually, most don't start out that way. The CASA volunteer, Joe, was appointed to the case involving the woman and her children. Most cases aren't as fortunate. At the end of the 2012-2013 fiscal year there were 1,009 pending abuse and neglect cases in the Peoria County Juvenile Court system. CASA has an available roster of 181 volunteers to call upon, leaving four out of five abuse and neglect cases in the county without a CASA volunteer.

The system works without them; it works better with them.

"(CASA volunteers) are the eyes and the ears for the judge outside of the courtroom," said Dominique Alexandre, one of three Advocate Supervisors who work out of the locked-door office at the end of the fourth floor hallway. The courtroom is a 15-second commute. "The judge tends to choose the more complicated, murkier cases to assign to our volunteers, cases that need some clarity."

Here's the program's written description of what it does:

"A CASA volunteer is a highly trained advocate that is; an information gatherer, obtaining all relevant facts about the child and the case; an advocate to ensure that those facts are brought before the court through reports presented to the court with copies to case parties, and a facilitator, to ensure that all fulfill their legal obligations to the child in a timely manner. A CASA volunteer is assigned to one case at a time and serves on that case until it closes."

The last one is an important distinction. Children who have been removed from their home because of abuse or neglect are also assigned a case worker from the state Division of Children and Family Services, or one of its contractors and a Guardian ad Litem. Those are paid services, and case workers are assigned to dozens of cases. The CASA volunteer is assigned to one case at a time and is an independent voice in the process only representing the best interest of the child, said Pam Perilles, the executive director of CASA of Peoria County.

Evidence shows CASA is not only good for the child, it's good for the taxpayer. Last year CASA of Peoria County volunteers spent more than 3,000 hours assisting children. Using \$110 an hour that a court-appointed Guardian Ad Litem might bill the court generates a revenue savings equivalent of \$330,000. Average cost for a child each month placed outside of the family home is almost \$6,000. CASA involvement reduces the time a child spends in foster care by an average of eight months, saving taxpayers \$47,512 per child.

"The real value of the CASA volunteer to me is that case workers and DCFS contractors in this state are overworked and understaffed," Judge Gilles said. "The volunteers are the adult eyes and ears in the system. They provide extra information not available in other ways. They work hard to engage the parents and take steps to correct the problems in the family."

The training is intensive. New recruits will receive about 30 hours of classroom training typically stretching over five weekday evenings and two Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. When sworn to service by a judge and assigned a case, CASA volunteers spend about five to 10 hours a month meeting with the child they're representing and attending all court hearings and appropriate interagency meetings regarding the child. An additional 10 hours of in-service per year is also required.

"It's a more intensive volunteer experience," said Michael Zernick, a paid advocate supervisor who started as a CASA volunteer. "It's not like a typical soup kitchen kind of volunteer, it's much more of a commitment than that."

Added Alexandre: "It is a wonderful journey for our volunteers. It's a very rewarding and challenging opportunity and a heavy, heavy time commitment."

The CASA workers prepare a report every six months on the case they are assigned to and appear in court to answer questions of the judge. Marti, a retired teacher from Peoria, has been a volunteer for about a year and a half, and has appeared in court three times.

"Each time I feel for all of the parents involved. It's very daunting to them to be inside the system," Marti said. "The CASA volunteer can be a very stabilizing presence to the child. A lot can change in the child's life while in the system, foster homes, case workers and everything else. The CASA volunteer is a permanent part that the child can count on."

Heather, of Minonk, received her training in April. She said she has a personality that leans more toward social work or child psychology, but went into business in college to better pay the bills. Volunteering for CASA satisfies the social justice side of her beliefs.

"It ignites that old fire in me. It feels like a calling," Heather said. "You definitely get more out of it than you put into it. It has made me not only a better parent, I think, it has made me a better person."

CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) needs volunteers. A lot of volunteers. There is an especially strong need for male and minority volunteers.

There are currently more than 1,000 pending juvenile abuse and neglect cases in Peoria County matched to a current roster of about 180 trained CASA volunteers. That means more than 80 percent of the cases move forward without the benefit of a CASA volunteer representing the individual needs of the children in the system who have been removed from their homes by a court order.

CASA will hold an informational meeting about the program on Thursday, Oct. 10, at Two25 in the Mark Twain Hotel, 225 NE Adams St., Peoria. The meeting will be from 5:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. Light snacks will be provided.

The next 30-hour training class begins Saturday, Nov. 9, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and continues on Nov. 11, 12, 13 and 14, from 5:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.; Saturday, Nov. 16, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; and concluding on Monday, Nov. 18, from 5:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.

The training location is the Detweiller Center, 809 W. Detweiller Drive (west of Knoxville Ave.) in Peoria. A swearing-in ceremony will be held at a later date in Courtroom 424, in the Peoria County Courthouse, 324 Main St., Peoria.

For more information, or to register, contact any one of the three advocate supervisors by email: Terry Pyatt, [tpyatt@peoriacounty.org](mailto:tpyatt@peoriacounty.org); Dominique Alexandre, [dalexandre@peoriacounty.org](mailto:dalexandre@peoriacounty.org); or Michael Zerneck, [mzerneck@peoriacounty.org](mailto:mzerneck@peoriacounty.org). Or call 309-669-2939.

Scott Hilyard can be reached at 686-3244 or by email at [shilyard@pjstar.com](mailto:shilyard@pjstar.com). Follow [@scotthilyard](https://twitter.com/scotthilyard) on Twitter.

**Comment or view comments »**

Sponsored Results

<p><b>Howard Orloff Imports</b> Get Pre-Approved for Used Jaguar, Land Rover, <a href="http://www.HowardOrloffPreowned.com">www.HowardOrloffPreowned.com</a></p>	<p><b>bad credit car loans</b> Zero down, 100% bank financing on new or used vehicles 97% <a href="http://Any-Credit-Auto-Loans.com">Any-Credit-Auto-Loans.com</a></p>	<p><b>Car Loan - 100% Approval</b> Get Loan Fast, Easy &amp; Guaranteed - Drive The Vehicle Of <a href="http://www.mycarloanonline.com">www.mycarloanonline.com</a></p>
--	--	---

Login with:

0 Comments

powered by: **viafoura**



Write your comment here

Follow

Newest ▾

