

## Child court program bolsters chances for brighter futures



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Ryan Lacerna, Tazewell County coordinator for CASA of the Tenth Judicial Circuit shows a fact sheet describing the mission of a Court Appointed Special Advocate to help an abused or neglected child in a court and social services system. [MIKE KRAMER/GATEHOUSE MEDIA ILLINOIS]

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For an abused or neglected child in a court and social services system, a Court Appointed Special Advocate can break the cycle of abuse and neglect, preventing it from carrying on to another generation.

CASA of the Tenth Judicial Circuit serves Peoria, Tazewell, Stark, Marshall and Putnam counties. The organization opened a Tazewell County field office in May 2018 because of a need to bolster an overworked county court system, said Ryan Lacerna, Tazewell County coordinator for CASA of the Tenth Judicial Circuit.

“There’s a higher risk that (abused or neglected children will) do the exact same things that happened to them as children to their own children, perpetuating the cycle of abuse and neglect,” said Lacerna. “Our organization aims to break that cycle by supporting the (court) system.”

CASA’s mission is to ensure that abused and neglected children are placed in safe, permanent homes as quickly as possible. CASA intervention, according to Lacerna, can mean the difference between homelessness and a safe dwelling, between dropping out of and excelling in school, between unemployment and a career path, between incarceration or freedom. In short, advocacy can mean the difference between failure and success in life.

“(Abused or neglected children) are some of the most vulnerable individuals in our society,” Lacerna said. “Kids involved with the foster care systems have higher likelihoods of participating in crime and deviant behavior once they transition to adulthood.

“At present, there are approximately 600 children involved with the Juvenile Abuse and Neglect Court system (in Tazewell County),” he added. “That’s a lot for this community. Currently, we’re serving about 11 percent of all cases.”

A year after it was established, the CASA Tazewell County field office, located at 351 Sabella St., Pekin, employs three full-time staff members and has recruited about 40 volunteer advocates. Volunteers are required to submit to background checks and attend 30 hours of training before they are sworn in as officers of the court.

“From there, they work as another set of eyes and ears for the judge, to get the critical information that he and the rest of the court need to make the most appropriate decision for a child and for their life,” said Lacerna. “Our volunteers go into homes, they meet with a child, interview them, and interview anyone else involved with the case, including the parents (or) the foster parents. Then, they write court reports, which get submitted to the court, detailing objectively what they’ve seen and what they’ve heard. They try to convey as well as possible the wishes of the child to the court and they share any concerns they may have.”

CASA volunteers are appointed at a judge’s discretion on an as-needed basis, Lacerna said.

“There are a lot of kids that we’d like to serve and work with, but we’re appointed at the discretion of the court,” he said. “(A judge) makes the decision on whether CASA’s appropriate. Usually, it’s on cases where maybe there are some concerns or issues that need to be monitored or

they need more information. They'll appoint us to get that information for them."

Currently, Tazewell County has only one attorney working as a guardian ad litem, a guardian appointed by a court to protect the interests of a minor in a particular matter. Because of the number of children currently in the county's Juvenile Abuse and Neglect Court system, the guardian ad litem's ability to communicate with an advocate for them is limited, according to Surabhi Vishanath, an advocate supervisor for the CASA Pekin branch.

"That's part of why we're involved and why the court decides to involve us," she said. "We get to be that advocate for that child, be involved in a more step-by-step process and meet with them at least once or twice a month. The whole goal is to be able to move these kids through the court system much more swiftly, whether that means they're returning home to their parents or if it means they're moving toward a goal of an adoption. I think with our relationship with the kids, we're able to see if they're getting what they need for their current situations, find out what they need more of as far as help in certain areas and get them that help. We're not providing that help, but we're able to advocate for it."

In the year that the Tazewell County office has been operational, Lacerna believes that staff members and volunteers have done effective work in locally helping address a national problem.

"The foster care system nation-wide is overburdened with a lot of cases," he said. "There are a lot of children who have been taken from their homes through no fault of their own. They're placed in foster care, and their futures are uncertain. I think our organization has done a good job of making sure these children's voices are heard, and their interests are kept at the forefront of people's minds."

CASA of the Tenth District receives federal funding through the Victims of Crimes Act and through some resources from the county, according to Lacerna. However, the Pekin field office depends on grants, fund-raising activities, and donations for the majority of its operational finances.

For more information about the Tazewell County CASA field office, visit [www.casaofthetenth.org](http://www.casaofthetenth.org).