

Keeping #EyesOnKids During COVID-19

A COMMUNITY RESOURCE FROM
CASA of the Tenth Judicial Circuit



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April is National Child Abuse Prevention Month, and our attention rightly turns to ways we can support children who have experienced abuse or neglect. For the past twelve years, Youth Service Network Panel and Peoria County partnered to bring awareness about Child Abuse to the community with an annual Hands Around the Courthouse. Due to the Shelter-In-Place order we were not able to come together, hold hands and hear from our local Judges and States Attorney speak on this important issue in our community.

As of today, Peoria County, has 1,186 pending abuse and neglect cases. Tazewell County has over 700. The Tenth Judicial Circuit has more pending cases per capita than Cook County. That is a lot of children in our backyard that need our help. These children are our future.

In this time of social distancing, we must all work to remain socially close to children. Child abuse and neglect is likely on the rise in the face of this pandemic, as families are put under more financial and emotional stress, but reporting may be down.

Children are no longer in the public eye—they are not at schools or daycare, or in other locations where caring adults would be able to spot signs of abuse. We should follow the CDC guidelines and be physically distant but remain socially close—especially to children who have experienced abuse and neglect.

Everyday life has been turned upside down. But for a child who has experienced abuse or neglect, this may be just another season of turmoil—because of isolation, lack of social connections and potentially, poor mental and emotional health.

We all need to be hyper-vigilant about keeping kids safe during this difficult, unprecedented season of isolation.

Children who have been living in these situations can become accustomed to being overlooked. In fact, most children removed from their families for maltreatment have suffered from neglect as opposed to active abuse.

While April is used to educate communities about abuse, researchers at the Harvard Center on the Developing Child have pointed out that despite this, child neglect receives far less attention than abuse. Compared to active

abuse, chronic neglect has been found to be associated with a larger range of damage to children.

Having experienced abuse or neglect has lasting consequences for these youth.

The US Children's Bureau has found that at age 17, more than one quarter of youth in foster care have been referred for substance abuse treatment or counseling at some point. By age 21, 20 percent of youth who were in foster care at age 17 have been incarcerated within the prior two years.

Twenty-two percent of former foster youth, by age 21, have given birth to or fathered a child. Forty-two percent have experienced homelessness at some point.

We have great hope for these youth despite the long odds against them. At age 17, 94 percent of youth in foster care reported that they had a supportive adult in their lives who they could rely on for advice or emotional support. Having a stable relationship with a supportive adult can help children do well even when they have faced significant hardships. This has a tremendous effect on our communities.

Removing children from an environment in which they experienced abuse or neglect does not guarantee positive outcomes for those children. They need quality, therapeutic care and support to move beyond those experiences and thrive.

For children to thrive despite abuse or neglect, resilience is key. The most common factor in developing resilience, according to the Harvard Center on the Developing Child, is having a stable relationship with a supportive adult.

Keeping children safe by supporting families and reporting suspected abuse or neglect is everyone's responsibility. This call to action is not just for families and those who work on behalf of children; rather, it is the sounding of an alarm to the mail carrier, delivery person, grocery store clerk, pastor, drug store cashier, virtual teacher, and next-door neighbor. Will you join us in keeping a watchful eye on our children?

Reporting is everyone's responsibility.

- It's up to all of us to make sure children are safe. Here are some resources to learn more or report suspected abuse or neglect:
 - If you suspect a child is in immediate danger, contact the police or 9-1-1.
 - To report suspected abuse or neglect, contact DCFS Hotline at (800)358-5117. You can also contact the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline via text, phone or online chat, to report abuse or if you are afraid you might hurt someone - <https://www.childhelp.org/childhelp-hotline/>.
 - For information on preventing abuse, visit the website of Child Abuse America at <https://preventchildabuse.org/>.
 - For information on the CASA/GAL program and on the effects of child abuse or neglect, visit the National CASA/GAL Association for Children's website at <https://nationalcasagal.org/>.
- In this stressful time, we encourage parents and caregivers to reach out if they are struggling. If you are a parent or caregiver who needs support, contact the National Parent Hotline at 1-855-427-2736 or go to <https://www.nationalparenthelpline.org/what-we-do>

Community members can make life better for vulnerable children. **BE A CASA!**

To get that care and support, children need an adult who can advocate for them and who they can lean on over time. Now is the time for each of us to become that adult, by becoming a CASA volunteer or supporting our program so others can.

One group of people who speak up for children is **CASA** volunteers. They work with children in the child welfare system who have experienced abuse or neglect. They meet with children in person at least monthly, advocate for children's best interests and provide information to judges that helps them make the most well-informed decisions for each child.

Older youth are some of the youth most in need of advocates. Although babies are at the highest risk of being maltreated, nearly 20 percent of children in foster care nationally are age 15 or older.

For a great number of these youth, **CASA** volunteers are that supportive adult. Our programs serve approximately one-third of youth in foster care. Our volunteers are trained to understand the impact of trauma on children. They advocate for services that promote healing and help children build resilience. The work **CASA** volunteers do is life-changing, and sometimes lifesaving.

These in-person visits provide an opportunity for **CASA** volunteers to ensure the child is safe and well-cared for. But right now, meeting in person with the children they advocate for is difficult or impossible. This means it is harder for them to gauge what is going on in children's lives, and their needs.

Staff and volunteers at **CASA** of the Tenth Judicial Circuit are finding creative ways to continue to meet with children. Weekly calls and video chats have provided many resources for struggling families.

This kind of creativity is what will make a real difference in children's lives right now. It is the kind of creativity that people in all sectors of society are demonstrating.

CASA of the Tenth Judicial Circuit is also working with partners like the Center for Prevention and Abuse.

If you are willing to get involved in a life-changing and sometimes life-saving cause—the safety, health and well-being of a child—join us in speaking up for a child at this time of community crisis. When the world re-opens, the need will be greater than ever.

- Those who want to change a child's life as a CASA volunteer can use this time to learn more about the children we serve and to take advantage of the NEW VIRTUAL TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES
- That's where CASA of the Tenth Judicial Circuit comes in. We recruit, train and support volunteers who get to know children and the adults around them, and who advocate for those children's needs in court and in the community. Our volunteers are simply everyday people who care deeply about children and are ready to make a child's life better. They are part of a national network of 93,300 volunteers who are doing this work.

Many of the children we serve are not used to having adults in their lives who they can trust. Most children who experience abuse or neglect are victimized by their own parents. Parental drug abuse, for example, was involved in more than one third of cases of children being removed from families for maltreatment in 2018, nationwide. By advocating for children's needs, community members can make a major impact when it comes to mitigating this kind of damage. Visit www.casaofthetenth.org or email casa@peoriacounty.org.