



Nebraska CASA Association CASA Fund Final Report July 2012

As required by LB463, Nebraska CASA issues this report to the Supreme Court, State Court Administrator, Clerk of the Legislature, and the Governor regarding the Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Fund. The CASA Fund was established by the 2011 Nebraska Legislature to recruit and train CASA volunteers, to develop new CASA programs or expand current CASA programs into areas not currently served and to create new and innovative programming for CASA.

Twenty-two local CASA programs across Nebraska recruit, train and supervise volunteers who speak in court for the safety and well-being of children who have been abused or neglected. The Nebraska CASA Association partners with those local CASA programs, providing leadership, vision, quality assurance, training, technical assistance and pass-through funding.

The CASA Fund has succeeded in its intention to assist the network of CASA programs in Nebraska in reaching the vision of providing a CASA volunteer for every child who needs one by the year 2020. The information in this report pertains to fiscal year July 1, 2011, to June 30, 2012.

Eight hundred and forty-seven (847) CASA volunteers were trained during the fiscal year. Nebraska State Statutes and the *National CASA Standards for Local CASA/GAL Programs* require a minimum of 30 hours of pre-service training before a volunteer is assigned to a case. In addition, State Statutes require a minimum of 10 hours of continuing education for ongoing volunteers (National CASA Standards require a minimum of 12 hours). Of the 847 CASA volunteers trained during the fiscal year, 204 were new volunteers, and 643 were ongoing volunteers. While the number of new volunteers trained is consistent with the previous fiscal year (203 in FY10/11), this represents a marked increase in the number of volunteers who received their required continuing education (430 in FY10/11). In many cases, that meant that volunteers who had become inactive (not taking cases) were able to be reactivated and to serve as vital advocates for abused and neglected children.

Local CASA programs spent \$332,270 providing training for CASA volunteers during the fiscal year. As noted above, Nebraska State Statutes and *National CASA Standards for Local CASA/GAL Programs* require both initial (pre-service) training for new volunteers and continuing education for ongoing CASA volunteers. The cost for training for new volunteers totaled \$241,607. The cost of providing continuing education for ongoing volunteers totaled \$95,663. The amount provided through the CASA Fund for recruitment and training efforts for FY11/12 was \$72,000.

Two hundred and eighty (280) volunteers were recruited during the previous year. Not all volunteers who are recruited are able to complete the training and/or be assigned cases. Prospective volunteers discontinue initial training for any of a number of reasons, including schedule changes, moving from the area or realizing that this is not the appropriate volunteer match for them. Of the 280 volunteers recruited during the year, 204 completed initial training and were assigned to cases.

National CASA Standards for Local CASA/GAL Programs limit volunteers to serving no more than two cases at a time. Volunteers are able to give devoted attention to the children they serve, to get

to know those children well, and to represent their needs, desires and best interests, because the volunteers are focused on a small number of children.

Recruitment is vital to local CASA programs. As with any volunteer (or employment) opportunity, there is turnover. New volunteers need to be recruited to serve additional cases and to replace retiring or redirected volunteers. Volunteers are asked to serve for at least one year after completing training and to remain with a child until her or his court case is closed. Almost all volunteers fulfill both of those obligations and more.

Three new CASA programs are serving counties that did not have a CASA program, and two programs expanded into nearby counties. All five programs received grants through the CASA Fund.

- Cheyenne County CASA was established at the request of Judge Randin Roland. The program has achieved full member status with the National CASA Association and is in the process of obtaining nonprofit status. It currently operates under an umbrella agreement with a local nonprofit, Kids Plus. The program hired a Program Director, Yvonne Donaldson, who began work on June 1, 2012. They are in the process of recruiting their first class of CASA volunteers.
- Lincoln County CASA was established when Judge Kent Turnbull expressed openness—even eagerness—to having a CASA program serve the Lincoln County Court. The Lincoln County CASA program board of directors has established a good foundation of community support, and they hired a Program Director, Stephanie Miller, who began work April 1, 2012. They have trained their first class of volunteers, and Judge Turnbull swore them in on June 27, 2012. Two volunteers have accepted cases and have begun work.
- Saunders County CASA was reestablished at the request of the County Attorney after several years of inactivity. The county designated a significant portion of Juvenile Justice funds to the Saunders County CASA program, and the program hired a Program Director, Susan Gottschalk. The program has trained three classes of volunteers and is actively serving the children of Saunders County.
- CASA of South Central Nebraska expanded into Webster County. They have worked diligently to recruit volunteers, and one volunteer has been sworn in and is advocating for one child with numerous and complex issues.
- Seward County CASA expanded into Jefferson County and has plans to expand into other nearby counties as well. In anticipation of future expansion, their board of directors changed their program name to Southeast Nebraska CASA. They have recruited and trained four volunteers in Jefferson County and are serving three children there. Their goal is to serve 90% of the abuse/neglect cases in Jefferson County by the end of calendar year 2012.

CASA served 37 courts during the year. Local CASA programs served the county courts in the following counties:

Adams	*Jefferson
*Buffalo	Kearney
Cass	Keith
**Cheyenne	**Lincoln
Clay	Madison
Colfax	Merrick
Dawson	Nuckolls
Dodge	Otoe
Fillmore	Perkins
Furnas	Phelps
Garden	Platte

Gosper	Red Willow
Hall	**Saunders
Hamilton	Scotts Bluff
Harlan	Seward
Hitchcock	*Webster
Howard	York

*County courts added during FY11/12.

**County courts added during FY10/11.

Local CASA programs also serve the separate juvenile courts in the following counties:

Douglas
Lancaster
Sarpy

1,247 children were served by CASA volunteers during the fiscal year. While 1,247 children had the benefit of CASA advocacy, over 1,400 were on a waiting list for CASA services. Children on the waiting list are identified by judges as in need of CASA advocacy but for whom no CASA volunteer is available. Nebraska CASA does not keep statistics in the 56 counties where there is no CASA program.

A brief overview of some successes and challenges during fiscal year 2011-2012. In spite of the difficult economy and the shrinking of county budgets and charitable giving, CASA programs in Nebraska experienced successes. Among them are:

Outcome evaluation/partnering with UNO. CASA in Nebraska partnered with the University of Nebraska-Omaha's Grace Abbott School of Social Work and Dr. Jeanette Harder to provide helpful resources and evaluation tools. Dr. Harder worked with Master's Level social work students who provided the following services:

- Published a literature review—researching scholarly works regarding the CASA program across the nation
- Provided a retrospective analysis of data—reviewing five years of statistical data for all local CASA programs in Nebraska and publishing reports and trends that they can use for grant writing, funding appeals, and to better tell their story
- Worked with local program staff members to develop a logic model—a visual representation of how CASA works to effect change for abused and neglected children)
- Performed a needs assessment in counties that currently have no CASA program—researching current statistics and trends regarding abused and neglected children, surveying judges and county attorneys regarding their openness to and desire for a CASA program to serve their county and helping to establish priorities for expanding or new CASA programs
- Worked with local program staff members to develop an evaluation tool that will help to identify outcomes of CASA services (helping to track the specific difference a CASA volunteer makes in the life of an abused or neglected child). The tool is still being developed, and we hope to begin implementing it in October of 2012.

The partnership has been beneficial to CASA and to UNO, and the information gleaned has been most helpful to local CASA programs as they interpret for others the unique role of court-appointed special advocacy for children.

Expansion into neighboring county. One program notes that as a result of CASA Fund monies, they were able to begin serving children in a neighboring county that had no CASA program. They were able to recruit and train four volunteer advocates, three of whom have been assigned cases and are actively meeting with and advocating for their CASA children. The program projects that they will serve 90% of abused and neglected children by December 31, 2012.

First class of trained volunteer advocates. Another program lists as their greatest success story their “first fully trained class of wonderful volunteer advocates.” The program notes that the new group of volunteer advocates includes several “credentialed and diverse” persons, including a newly retired nonprofit director, former social workers, a human resources specialist from a national corporation, a state government employee, a retired legal secretary, an ordained minister and a rancher/homemaker who is also a trained CASA volunteer in another county. The program declares, “Without the grant money, their training would not have been possible.”

Community support. Another—new—CASA program notes: “One major success is the amount of support we are seeing from the community.” They utilized grant money to inform the community about CASA and have garnered support from private resources, local companies, the hospital, and numerous individuals. They note that as a result of the CASA Fund, they were able to apply for and receive their National CASA provisional membership and nonprofit status with the IRS. They describe these as “wonderful milestones for a fledgling nonprofit.”

And finally, two stories of the difference a CASA volunteer made in the lives of two families:

A CASA volunteer was assigned to a family of five children who were re-entering the system due to alleged neglect by their mother (leaving them unsupervised). The CASA volunteer quickly learned there was more going on with the family; namely, the mother was terminally ill and the children were left “unsupervised” when she was in the hospital. She left the children in the care of her boyfriend who chose not to follow through on his promises to her to keep the children safe.

The CASA volunteer worked to make sure the mother had proper supervision for the children so that she could receive care. The CASA volunteer worked with the former foster family, who still had a strong relationship with the children, to keep all of the children placed together in the former foster home. The CASA volunteer advocated strongly for what the children wanted (four wished to be adopted and one wanted a guardianship) and to keep them together. She also recommended individual therapy for the children in order to help them grieve. While it was very sad that the mother passed away before the case was closed, the children were subsequently adopted (and one guardianship).

The second success story involves the adoption of two boys by their grandparents. Over the past several years, relative placements have been given less support and lower payments than other foster parents. These grandparents needed services and support in order to care for the two boys, both of whom were in need of additional services. The CASA volunteer assigned not only was a resource to the family; she contacted other resources to see if she could get what the family needed. She also helped them navigate the adoption process and specifically recommended that they discuss a subsidized adoption with DHHS due to the boys needing services into the future. Without the CASA volunteer’s research and recommendation, it is doubtful that an adoption subsidy would have been offered by the Department. The boys were successfully adopted, and the grandparents have been in touch

periodically with the CASA volunteer since the adoption was finalized. The boys are doing very well.

CASA programs in Nebraska have also encountered **challenges** through the fiscal year. Among them:

Keeping cases moving. Several local programs cite the challenge of continued near-constant changes in case management with the Department of Health and Human Services. They report that it is often difficult to find out who the case manager is, and once that person is identified, CASA volunteers and staff have great difficulty getting in touch with him or her. While DHHS's goal is to return calls and emails within 24 hours, most local CASA programs find that calls or emails are seldom returned within even 48 hours. One CASA program director noted, "It is often difficult to keep volunteers engaged and enthusiastic about their work when they are virtually ignored by other members of the 'team,' namely, DHHS."

Conflicts of interests and dual roles, a.k.a. "Everyone knows everyone." A smaller, rural program, describes the challenges of conflicts of interest or dual roles when serving small counties. In places where almost everyone in the community knows almost everyone else, it is difficult to find a CASA volunteer who doesn't have a prior relationship with a family and who can therefore provide the sort of objective viewpoint that typically characterizes the CASA relationship. It is also difficult to find service providers in the community who don't have conflicts of interest or experience dual roles.

Funding. A major challenge for CASA programs is funding. With the current economic climate, many counties are cutting back funding for all but essential services, and counties have historically been strong financial supporters of CASA programs. Local programs—especially rural programs—face the challenge of finding consistent funding sources and a diversity of funding sources that can help to sustain their vital work.