

CASA Fund Year-End Report July 15, 2023

Nebraska CASA issues this report to the Foster Care Review Office, 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 in 54 Nebraska counties recruit, screen, train and supervise volunteers who are appointed by Judges to speak in court for the safety and best interest of children who have been abused or neglected. The Nebraska CASA Association partners with these local CASA programs providing leadership, quality assurance, training, technical assistance, and funding. The information in this report pertains to fiscal year July 1, 2022 to June 30, 2023.

The CASA Fund continues to move toward its goal to provide a CASA volunteer for every Nebraska child who needs one. Nebraska State Statutes and the National CASA standards for local CASA 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, and National CASA Standards a minimum of 12, annual hours of continuing education for volunteers.

Local programs continue to use all forms of advertising, public events, community presentations, posters, local media advertising and stories, websites, social media, newsletters, yard signs, and word of mouth to recruit volunteers. Local programs are experiencing fewer people interested in becoming CASA volunteers in the last year. Virtual and in-person methods are used to train new volunteers. There were 175 new volunteers who were screened, trained, and sworn in as CASA advocates during the fiscal year. This is 31 fewer than the last fiscal year.

Recruitment is vital to local CASA programs. New volunteers need to be recruited to serve additional children's cases and to replace retiring or redirected volunteers. Volunteers are asked to serve for at least one year after completing new volunteer 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.

Not all volunteers who are recruited are able to complete the training and/or be assigned cases. In addition to background criminal screening and reference checks, local CASA programs use our 30 hours of CASA new volunteer training as part of the screening process to ensure volunteers are appropriate for the job of serving as an advocate for abused and neglected children.

Nebraska has seen a 121% growth in volunteers serving children since the CASA Fund began. The pandemic resulted in a decrease in active volunteers. This year's challenges included lost funding and less people signing up to become volunteers.

- 421 volunteers for FY 2011/12
- 480 volunteers for FY 2012/13
- 663 volunteers for FY 2013/14
- 726 volunteers for FY 2014/15
- 770 volunteers for FY 2015/16
- 815 volunteers for FY 2016/17
- 820 volunteers for FY 2017/18
- 886 volunteers for FY 2018/19
- 957 volunteers for FY 2019/20
- 938 volunteers for FY 2020/21
- 960 volunteers for FY 2021/22
- 931 volunteers for FY 2022/23

In this fiscal year, 149 volunteers left the program. Retention efforts led to 11 less volunteers leaving than the previous fiscal year. Unfortunately, the increase in numbers of people quitting paid positions seems to be a pattern CASA is also experiencing with volunteers. CASA's statewide focus on volunteer and staff retention continues with extensive training including Reflective Practice and Mindfulness. The goal of the Reflective Practice program is to increase communication and the effectiveness of communication with staff and volunteers to increase retention rates. A three-year project assessment resulted in the findings that emotional exhaustion of CASA staff decreased while personal achievement increased.

New and Expanding Programs

CASA Connection – This program began serving Platte County in 1992, then Colfax County in 2000. Last year Nance County was added to their service area and volunteers from other counties offered to serve cases. This year the first volunteer was trained and sworn in who resides in the county.

SENCA CASA– Formerly known as Otoe County CASA, this program became one of Southeast Nebraska Community Action's (SENCA) programs in August of 2019. This partnership was created to determine if non-profit programs such as a community action agency could serve as an umbrella organization for local CASA programs in counties that have few children in care. Under SENCA's management CASA services have expanded into four unserved southeast Nebraska counties, Johnson, Richardson, Nemaha, and Pawnee. The program advocated for 38 children in the last fiscal year.

CASA of NorthCentral- For four years, Nebraska CASA has worked with a former CASA volunteer to form this program in Holt County. The program has experienced the challenges of finding qualified and committed staff. The third director has now been in place for one year and recruited, screened, and trained the first 5 volunteers who are now serving children.

CASA of the Midlands- This program was formerly the CASA Project of Dodge County housed within the County Attorney's office. The program only served 3 to 5 children per year. Now their own 501c3 agency with a board of directors, director, and volunteer coordinator, the program is increasing the number of volunteers to serve children in

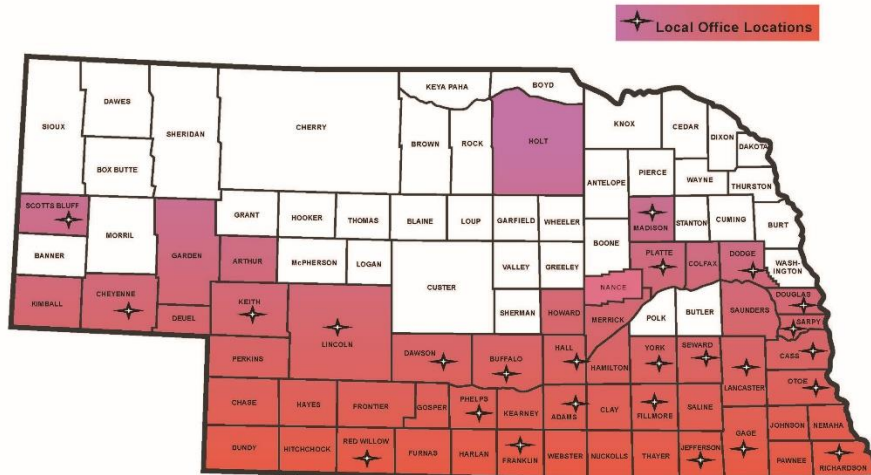
Dodge County and has expanded into Saunders County. This year they served 60 children with 25 active volunteers. The program is working toward expansion into Washington County.

CASA served 54 courts during the year. This is an increase of 22 counties since the CASA Fund began. Local CASA programs served the county courts in the following counties:

Adams	Garden	Nance
Arthur	Gosper	Nemaha
Buffalo	Hall	Nuckolls
Cass	Hamilton	Otoe
Chase	Harlan	Pawnee
Cheyenne	Hayes	Perkins
Clay	Hitchcock	Phelps
Colfax	Holt	Platte
Dawson	Howard	Red Willow
Deuel	Jefferson	Richardson
Dodge	Johnson	Saline
Dundy	Kearney	Saunders
Fillmore	Keith	Scotts Bluff
Franklin	Kimball	Seward
Frontier	Lincoln	Thayer
Furnas	Madison	Webster
Gage	Merrick	York

Local CASA programs also serve the separate juvenile courts in Douglas, Lancaster, and Sarpy Counties.

Nebraska CASA Programs



2,093 children were served by CASA volunteers during the fiscal year. Despite the decline in active volunteers, CASA advocated for an additional 82 children this fiscal year.

A brief overview of some successes during fiscal year 2022-2023

CASA for Douglas County and Sarpy County CASA programs have experienced specific challenges related to the Department of Health and Human Service's private contract to serve children in those juvenile courts transitioning back to Child and Family Services staffing. Due to the transition of services and the lack of caseworkers, communication on children's cases has been challenging. This has not only resulted in services not being provided to families, but CASA programs being asked to provide services in addition to advocacy for children. Examples are transportation, needed supplies for children, communication to services providers, and even temporary housing. CASA continues to step up and provide services out of their scope to ensure children have their needs met.

A) FINANCIAL REPORTS: A narrative report detailing the expenditures of your CASA Fund Recruitment and Retention and (if applicable) New or Expansion Grant.

Program Name	Recruitment and Training	New & Expanding
CASA Connection	14,339.00	10,000.00
CASA for Douglas County	61,484.00	
CASA for Lancaster	36,000.00	
CASA of Gage Co	15,562.00	
CASA of Midlands	13,379.00	15,000.00
CASA of Northeast	9,527.00	
CASA of NorthCentral		20,000.00
CASA of Scotts Bluff	15,460.00	
CASA of South Central	25,000.00	
CASA of York	12,000.00	
Cass County CASA	11,597.00	
Dawson/Gosper	15,492.00	
Heartland CASA	14,054.00	
Kearney/Buffalo	21,040.00	
Lincoln County CASA	13,000.00	
Phelps/Harlan	14,003.00	
PlainsWest	15,167.00	
Prairie Plains	15,476.00	
Sarpy County CASA	28,365.00	
SENCA CASA	13,355.00	
Southeast Nebraska CASA	14,261.00	
Trails West CASA	11,777.00	
TOTAL	\$390,338.00	\$45,000.00

Funds were used for Casa Manager software that is used by local CASA programs as our database for children and volunteer data. The total annual cost of licenses was \$18,966. The cost for Casa Connect that pulls data for the state association to run reports for local or statewide programs, was \$999.

Training was provided by the Nebraska CASA Association Training Director for all new local CASA staff to attend a Training of Facilitators. This training is required in order for CASA staff to conduct the required 30-hour training of new CASA Volunteers. The Training Director also led the planning and implementation of a statewide conference for all CASA volunteers and staff and two Fostering Futures training courses for volunteers and staff who work with older youth. \$31,336,83 in salary and taxes for the Nebraska CASA Training Director was charged to this grant.

An expenditure of \$203.41 for adult and child abuse background checks.

Volunteer recruitment marketing costs of \$1050.14 for statewide recruitment of volunteers.

Nebraska CASA Association Nebraska contracted with the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center to conduct a cost analysis study. Results included key measures to indicate costs and benefits of CASA programs in Nebraska.

1. **STORIES:** Stories of a volunteer affecting the life of a child served by CASA. (All names have been changed to protect confidentiality.)

A case with a 17-year-old, non-verbal and autistic young man who was taken to the hospital for malnutrition was assigned to volunteer. Ed has been volunteering for 15 years and willing to take on any challenge. The young man weighed 90 pounds and would have died without medical intervention. It was described by a nurse that she imagined this is what "concentration camp survivors" were like. The boy almost died when hospital staff re-introduced food to him. His parents just kept repeating he was a picky eater. Ed visited the hospital, the foster home, and the rehab facility, made an appointment to talk to the county attorney, relentlessly called DHHS for updates, and became the only CASA volunteer invited to a pretrial hearing in this county. At that meeting, Ed had information on the boy's weight gain, daily schedule, foster care contact information, and interviews with the doctors and nurses who saw what happened in the hospital. The GAL had only seen him one time, and DHHS had no updates. Because of Ed's input and information, parental visits are supervised, we are looking for long term care, and the volunteer is scrambling to get information on developmental disability services before this young man ages out. Before Ed's involvement, DHHS was trying to find a way for him to return home. Ed's dedication is unmatched and we're grateful for him.



CASA volunteer, Jane, was able to clarify key messaging to the judge in her case. Jane worked with a family with 3 young children. According to an email from a teacher, one of the children had recently had an incident where he became aggressive with a classmate. The caseworker for the children relayed this information from the teacher to the GAL and described the incident as a "hit". The GAL then relayed the story to the county attorney but described the incident as a "punch". When it came time for court, the county attorney told the judge that the young boy had been getting into fistfights at school. The judge was very alarmed by this, and she chastised the parents for his concerning behavior. When the judge began discussing the idea of moving back the reunification date to address the boy's issues, CASA volunteer Jane spoke up. Jane was the only one on the case who spoke to the teacher in person. Jane learned that there was one incident being just a small push between 7-year-olds. It certainly was not a hit, a punch, or a fight. Without Jane taking the initiative to reach out to the teacher, and her willingness to speak up in court, these parents and their child would have had their separation unnecessarily extended.

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A newly trained CASA volunteer advocated for a little boy who was constantly sick, and his school attendance was concerning. The school had sent his mom and foster parents two warning letters that he could not miss any more school and received no response. This CASA volunteer found missing school was a big concern. At the next family team meeting, the CASA volunteer brought up the concerns, and the child's mom said she received the letter, knew he was sick often, and would take him to the doctor "next week." Two weeks later, the CASA volunteer visited the child and asked about the doctor's appointment and was told it was "next week." Three weeks went by, and the child missed more school. When it was time for the CASA Volunteer to write her court report, she wrote in her court report that she was frustrated that the child's mom wasn't taking his constant illness more seriously and recommended that the Judge court order her to take him to the doctor and have an allergy test completed. The judge did order a medical appointment be scheduled and completed as soon as possible and follow all the doctor's recommendations. Later that month, the CASA volunteer followed up with the doctor and discovered that this child was allergic to cedar, grass, weeds, mold, and Amoxicillin. This child's room at the foster house was in the basement, which had mold. At the mom's house, there were four glass aquariums, they contained rats, snakes, hermit crabs, and tarantulas and were all lined with cedar wood shaving. Unfortunately, it took court intervention, and the judge took the recommendation seriously and ordered the necessary medical tests to get this child the medical attention he needed. If it wasn't for this CASA volunteer's persistence and advocacy on this case and for being this child's voice when no one would listen to him, he could have been prescribed Amoxicillin, which could have been deadly.

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“Josh” was just 3 years old when he was abandoned by his mother and placed in a foster home. Josh showed signs of severe neglect and physical abuse: he had scars on his body, was not toilet trained, and his speech was extremely limited.

The judge immediately recommended that a CASA be assigned to Josh’s case, knowing that a CASA would be able to provide individual advocacy to Josh to ensure his urgent needs were met and that he would receive the time and attention he needed to heal physically and emotionally.

On the outside, Josh was an adorable, friendly child, but his history of abuse had caused serious damage to his inner, emotional health. When he became frustrated, Josh would act violently. This challenging behavior proved difficult for foster parents, so within seven months Josh was moved three times.

Josh’s CASA saw that the changes aggravated Josh’s emotional trauma, so she worked to keep him from being moved again. She advocated for intensive therapy and special education as well as training for the foster parents in order to stabilize Josh in their home and in school.

For the CASA, these improvements were not enough. Believing that Josh needed a forever home, she continued to make inquiries about a permanent adoptive home, and when a young couple became interested in adopting Josh, his CASA spoke to them weekly, keeping them up to date on Josh’s progress in school and at home.

When Josh was set to meet his adoptive parents for the first time, his CASA was with him. In fact, she helped him throughout the transition to a new home and continued to see him weekly until the adoption was finalized.