

## **CASA Fund Year-End Report July 30, 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 55 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, 2023 to June 30, 2024.

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 two years. Virtual and in-person methods are used to train new volunteers. Despite a three month statewide television, radio, and online volunteer recruitment and advertising campaign this year, there were 187 new volunteers who were screened, trained, and sworn in as CASA advocates during the fiscal year. This is 12 more than last year, but 19 fewer than two years ago.

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, an interview, 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
- 797 volunteers for FY 2023/24

In this fiscal year, 104 volunteers left the program. Retention efforts led to 45 less volunteers leaving than in the previous fiscal year. However, there were many volunteers who needed to take a long-term break from serving on cases due to stress and frustration. CASA's statewide focus on volunteer and staff retention continues with extensive training including Reflective Practice. 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. Two years ago, 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 41 children in the last fiscal year.

CASA of NorthCentral- This newly formed program serves Holt County. The program has experienced the challenges of finding qualified and committed staff. The third director since the inception of the program left this year. Volunteers did serve 7 children and 3 new volunteers are scheduled to be trained by Nebraska CASA staff.

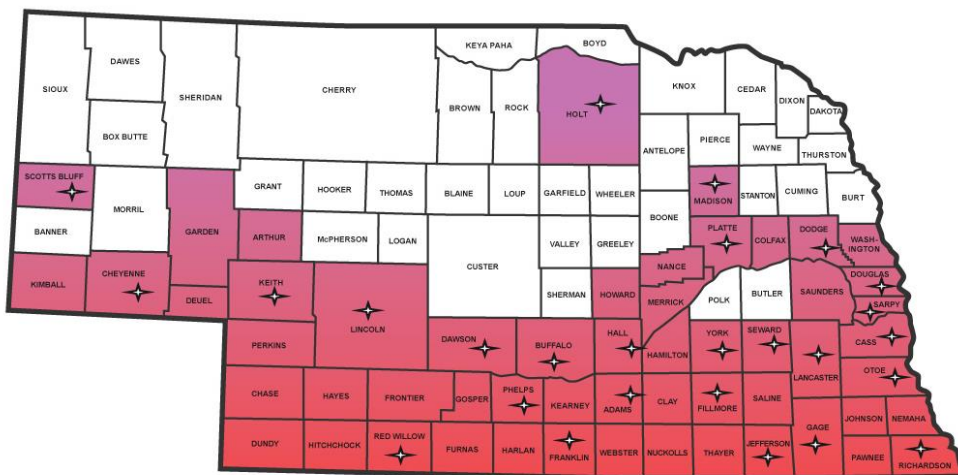
CASA of the Midlands- This program was formerly the CASA Project of Dodge County housed within the County Attorney's office. The program only served 3 to 5 children per year. Now their own 501c3 agency with a board of directors, director, and volunteer coordinator, the program is increasing the number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

Dodge County and has expanded into Saunders and Washington Counties. This year 30 volunteers advocated for 64 children.

CASA served 55 courts during the year. This is an increase of 23 counties since the CASA Fund began. Local CASA programs served the county courts in the following counties:

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

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



**1,685 Children were served by CASA volunteers during the fiscal year.**

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

<b>Program Name</b>	<b>Recruitment and Training</b>	<b>New &amp; Expanding</b>
CASA Connection	15,320.00	9,671.00
CASA for Douglas County	46,585.00	
CASA for Lancaster	32,764.00	
CASA of Gage Co	12,612.00	
CASA of Midlands	16,616.00	9,673.00
CASA of Northeast	11,840.00	
CASA of NorthCentral	14,863.00	14,509.00
CASA of Scotts Bluff	15,623.00	
CASA of South Central	22,358.00	
CASA of York	12,998.00	
Cass County CASA	11,763.00	
Dawson/Gosper	18,561.00	
Heartland CASA	15,016.00	
Kearney/Buffalo	24,736.00	
Lincoln County CASA	12,843.00	
Phelps/Harlan	14,160.00	
PlainsWest	15,321.00	
Prairie Plains	14,012.00	
Sarpy County CASA	10,000.00	
SENCA CASA	15,482.00	7,225.00
Southeast Nebraska CASA	17,486.00	
Trails West CASA	14,012.00	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$384,971.00</b>	<b>\$41,078.00</b>

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 and administration was \$9,142.99. Basecamp software was also utilized on a statewide and local level for training, network sharing, volunteer recruitment tools, and other ways for our statewide network to cost effectively recruit, screen, train and support volunteer. It was partially funded by the CASA Fund at a cost of \$1,158.

Training was provided by the Nebraska CASA Association Training Director for 195+ 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 three new volunteer training courses for volunteers and staff when local programs were unable to conduct these in a timely fashion in order to retain interested volunteers. \$63,178.02 in salary and travel expenses for the Nebraska CASA Training Director was charged to this grant.

An expenditure of \$95 for adult and child abuse background checks.

Volunteer recruitment marketing costs of \$376.99 for statewide recruitment of volunteers.

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

A 10-year-old was assigned a CASA volunteer but was placed in a foster home about an hour outside of our service area. Fortunately, a new advocate from this county had just completed training and was sworn into the court. This child suffers from significant Autism and an array of behavioral issues. Our new advocate is a retired special education teacher and was able to attend court and recommend to all parties the need for special education services and therapy through the schools. She instructed the court on how to go about this expeditiously. This child will now have services provided to him, free of charge, for the life of the case. Also, he will be able to qualify for developmental disability services through college. There was such an incredible improvement that this child was nonverbal when he entered foster care and is now speaking.

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An 11-year-old girl and her newborn twin siblings were discovered in an environment where they were exposed to methamphetamine. These three children were removed from their mother's custody and placed into foster care together. Shortly after their removal, a dedicated CASA advocate was appointed to their case, swiftly becoming a steadfast presence in the children's lives, as well as that of their mother. While the goal remained reunification with the mother, her journey required intensive inpatient

substance abuse treatment and mental health counseling. The CASA advocate maintained regular engagement with both the children and their mother, visiting the foster home and providing support during the mother's treatment. After a year in foster care, a pivotal transition occurred as the children were reunited with their mother through a Bridge Program. Over the course of 18 months, this dedicated support system has guided the family toward resolution, with the mother now capably caring for her children and maintaining sobriety. The steadfast support of the CASA advocate persists as the mother and children navigate their transition to a new residence in an unfamiliar city.

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A CASA Volunteer has been assigned to the same case for all 5 years she has been a volunteer. The case she is assigned to has been in the foster care system since 2012, and as of 2019, the volunteer has greatly impacted the life of the child involved. When the youth had to move across the country to a psychiatric residential treatment facility, she did not have any clothes or essentials. Her CASA volunteer gathered her belongings to send to her. They were completely soiled with dog feces. The volunteer sorted through and washed what could be salvaged and stored the rest in her home so she could have them when she returned. The volunteer mailed her clothes and toiletries and continued to send care packages throughout the length of her stay.

This volunteer worked tirelessly to make sure this youth's educational needs were being met, as well as her social and emotional needs. The facility lacked communication processes, but once this volunteer hosted weekly meetings with her youth and the child welfare team. When the youth returned to Nebraska, her volunteer had to advocate fiercely for her to continue her online schooling, and not switch back to the school system that did not meet her needs. The volunteer served as the young woman's Educational Surrogate, which adds hours to the typical CASA volunteer job.

With the help of CASA's fundraising, the volunteer was able to purchase and program a brand-new laptop for this youth to finish her schooling and she received her high school diploma. The CASA volunteer organized all of the youth's family and case professionals and threw a graduation party for her, including a photographer for senior pictures and live music.

This CASA volunteer continues to advocate for her and her long-term success. She reminds her how the decisions she makes now will affect her future, especially in the case of her face tattoos. The CASA volunteer conducted much research and found a dermatologist that removes face tattoos at no cost and has been taking her youth to her removal sessions. This CASA volunteer has had a tremendous impact on this youth, and they have a strong bond that cannot be broken.

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In 2022 a case came in with a child who had multiple fractured ribs, right and left tibial fractures, and contusions on the chest and both arms. Both the father and mother had no idea

how this happened. A CASA was assigned, and she built a great rapport with not only the parents, but foster parents during the duration of this case. At first the visits were very tense. Everyone was adamant that the parents did not harm this child. The mother spent hours and days researching possible medical reasons, which could have played a factor in the abuse noted by the hospital. Both parents never took accountability and were in constant denial. Once the parents took accountability and stopped focusing on how these fractures could have happened and acknowledged something did indeed happen, the CASA volunteer felt like things were headed in the right direction. The parents had started complying with their court orders besides one or two items, but this was not good enough for the case manager. This is when the case manager put a halt to having the foster parents who were the child's grandparents, supervise visits and visits decreased due to the difficulty of having an outside agency who would supervise. It was traumatic not only for the adults in the case, but to the little boy. He was not sleeping, cried more than usual, and wasn't eating well. He missed seeing his parents. A few months went by, and the parents were complying with all their court orders, but the case manager was determined this case was going into permanent removal.

There was a professional meeting regarding the case. This is when the case manager was removed from the case, and we had another case manager assigned due to unbiased opinions and feelings. It was a breath of fresh air. Everyone felt lighter. The case progressed into unsupervised visits and overnights. The baby boy was thriving and overall, just happy. All case professionals including the Judge were so happy to see the progress mom and dad have achieved.

On June 4, 2024 this case closed with reunification! Nobody longs for a safe and loving family more than a child in foster care. CASA volunteers are empowered by the court to help make this dream a reality, which our volunteer did. She saw how hard both parents were working while dealing with a biased case manager. These parents just needed a few extra tools to help them. The CASA volunteer not only brought a positive change but hope for this family when all hope was lost. All it takes is one person to show up and be that constant not only for the child but for the family. Sadly, this CASA Volunteer passed away suddenly. Even though she could not be here to see the child reunify with his parents, she would have been so happy to know this child is not only safe, but his desire to be with his parents was realized.