

Recession puts extra burden on Venango advocate program

CASA is an advocate for children who come to the court's attention because of neglect or abuse.

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The Derrick. The News-Herald

Hard economic times are forcing many families to tap into basic survival skills to cope.

Tucked inside those struggling family units are children who often bear the brunt if their caregivers' frustrations give over to anger.

Such turmoil can spawn child neglect and abuse, a situation that can land a broken family in Venango County court.

Intense concerns that those children may get swallowed up in a cold, legal and unforgiving tug of war prompts Cinnamon Evans to spend long days at the county courthouse.

Evans, director of the county's Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program, has a singular purpose — to advocate for children who come to the attention of the court because of neglect or abuse. She is the only paid staffer for the 5-year-old program, created in 2005 and funded by local charitable trusts, churches and organizations. Youth Alternatives Inc. of Oil City is the umbrella agency.

As the program begins its sixth year, there is worry the gloomy recession will increase the workload at a time when the cadre of volunteers has dropped.

"With economic stresses, I think we will see more alcohol abuse and drug use and dependent children get caught in that," said Evans, adding that neglect and abuse can take many forms ranging from physical harm to failure to obtain medical care for a child. "It can put a dependent child into court where they need advocates."

Since its inception, CASA has been served by 41 volunteers who have completed a minimum of 30 hours of training in juvenile court proceedings, applicable laws, communication skills and more. Another 12-plus hours of in-service training is required each year.

Those volunteers, all of whom provide their services for free and commit to one year, have served 60 children in 32 families since 2005 by spending a minimum of 10 hours a month as an advocate for a child. The advocacy role is aimed at where the best place might be for a child — family, kinship (relatives) or foster family — to prevent further abuse or neglect.

"We are down to 21 active volunteers and that's not enough," Evans said. "What I'm asking for are individuals who want to make a difference in a child's life, to speak up for them, to join us. There's no compensation except the knowledge that you are doing a wonderful thing."

A CASA volunteer's role is threefold: to serve as a fact-finder by researching each case (visiting the school, talking with neighbors, reviewing records, maintaining documents) to help the judge; to speak before the court to represent the child's best interests; to continue to act as a "watch dog" for the child during the life of the case.

A 'new concept'

The success of the child advocacy program came into fuller focus two years ago when Venango County President Judge Oliver Lobaugh embraced a new concept in dealing with family crisis issues that landed its members in court.

Lobaugh became intrigued with a mediation process, in practice in a few jurisdictions, that focused on "family group decision-making."

"I wondered how it could tie in with the court system," said Lobaugh. "We used an adversarial process — one that had turf issues, parochial attitudes, duplications, little dialogue — in deciding how to deal with dependent children. Now, we are using the family group decision-making idea that puts everyone, including CASA, in the courtroom."

Emphasizing that the new routine "doesn't mean people haven't done bad things," Lobaugh said the Children and Youth Services agency, attorneys, substance abuse counselors, CASA volunteers and any other agency or person who is involved in helping neglected or abused children gather in a courtroom. "We get everyone, like neighbors or the pastor, to talk about what we can build on — we no longer talk just about a family's defects but about their strengths, too — and it allows the family to become actively involved and invested in the solution about these children. It is better than simply being dictated to by an agency or ordered by the court," Lobaugh said. "The best interest of the child is the most important thing."

For Lobaugh, healing a family by providing resources, guidance and even court orders to a point where a child can remain safely at home or at least with kin trumps a foster home.

"Is it foolproof? No, but it has reduced placements and if there are placements, they are not as long. It has to start with family — we can't just beat the drum," Lobaugh said.

A key element

In replacing the adversarial and often non-productive system, Venango County found it had a smaller-scale version already in place with CASA.

"With CASA, we didn't have to re-invent the wheel because we already had a strong voice in place for the child," Evans said.

In lobbying for more CASA volunteers, Lobaugh added, "The question is: Can you help the children? If you can, this is the program. But, be prepared to work."

(Information about how to join the CASA program is available by contacting Evans at 1-814-346-7221. Classes will begin Feb. 11.)