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Child advocacy program expands in Somerset Co.

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DAVIDSVILLE — A successful child advocate program has expanded in hopes of reaching more children in need.

Representatives from Cambria and Somerset County's Court Appointed Special Advocates, an umbrella program of Beginnings Inc., swore in six Somerset County volunteers on Monday at a ceremony held at St. David's Lutheran Church.

The new volunteers reflect the recent summer expansion of the program from Cambria County into Somerset County.

"We are so excited to reach the next phase of our expansion into Somerset County," said Paula Eppley-Newman, executive director of Beginnings Inc.

"The interest we have found in the Somerset community is gratifying, and we are happy to welcome all our new volunteers," she said.

Two volunteers from Cambria County and a new CASA staff member also were sworn in.

Trained volunteers are appointed by a judge to represent the best interests of a child.

They are responsible for researching the background and current situation of each case, speaking for the child in court and continuing to act as an overseer during the duration of the case, making sure it is brought to an appropriate conclusion and the child is placed in a safe, permanent and nurturing home.

"Each volunteer has to go through an interview and screening process and complete 30 hours of training and attend a juvenile court hearing," said Vicki Wilson, CASA program director.

The new members join a current roster of 28 active CASA volunteers.

"All our new volunteers have a wide variety of backgrounds – one has worked in mental health, another was a foster parent and another adopted two children who were in the system – so I think they will give great insight into the children we work with," Wilson said.

She added that she would like to see the program grow even more and expand into Bedford and Blair counties so it can become more regionally based.

"We want to continue to promote our program and also bring awareness to other counties about the benefits of having a voice for the children in the courtroom and also work to get a CASA volunteer to every child who needs one," Wilson said.

Since 1997, 135 Cambria County CASA volunteers have been trained and spoken out for 402 children and youth who have found themselves in the juvenile court system through no fault of their own.