

'They jump in with a lot of energy when we need them'

At a time when budgets are being cut and the number of abuse and neglect cases is growing, volunteers are helping children through rough times.

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A little-known volunteer program helps Cumberland County Judge Ed Guido sleep at night.

When he has to make wrenching decisions about whether to allow abused children to stay with their biological parents, he turns to volunteers with the Court Appointed Special Advocates, or CASA.

CASA matches a volunteer with a child declared dependent by the court because of abuse or neglect. The volunteers have a court order that lets them pry into the child's life, visit the family, ensure parents are complying with therapy appointments or job searches, read through court records and get to know their young charge well.

The program let Riley Campbell, 3, return to his parents, Robert Campbell and Amber Thompson of Shippensburg, after CASA volunteer Linda Wiser determined his parents had done the hard work to get him back.

It also helped sisters Jordan, 4, and J.T., 3, find a loving home with Pat and Chuck Stoup of Carlisle after Wiser determined their biological parents were too unstable to provide the home their daughters needed.

CASA "has been an amazing asset to help me sleep easier over making the tough decisions," Guido said. "They can dig where caseworkers can't, and they stay with one child or sibling group throughout the case."

Wendy Hoverter, administrator for Cumberland County Children and Youth Services, said CASA volunteers ease the burden on caseworkers who care for 12 to 18 families each.

The Cumberland County's Children and Youth's \$14 million budget has been cut by \$250,000 at the same time the number of referrals has surged upward in the poor economy, she said.

Hoverter said a recent change called the Permanency Practice Initiative means judges must make decisions about permanent placements for children more quickly.

Cases are reviewed more frequently and families are given more intensive therapy to help re-unify them sooner. If a home is not deemed safe, the child can be adopted more quickly.

The volunteers are important in helping the judge make those decisions, Hoverter said.

"We are very happy to have them," she said. "They jump in with a lot of energy when we need them."

Guido heard about the program when he was running for judge ten years ago. When he took the bench, he was assigned the child-dependency hearings, which often go to the newest judge because they are the toughest to decide.

It wasn't long before CASA proved its worth.

"I had a case where, based on the mom's testimony, the father had sexually abused his son," Guido said. "The court-appointed CASA volunteer dug and dug, reviewed psychiatric records, looked through legal documents and medical histories, and convinced me the mother was a pathological liar." The boy was returned to his dad.

The Cumberland County CASA program is one of 20 in the state. The closest ones are in York and Lancaster counties, said state CASA director Dennis Hockensmith. There has been growing interest in the program, began in Seattle in the late 1970s, particularly since it was mentioned on a recent episode of "Dr. Phil."

Cumberland County commissioners support the program, but many CASA programs are funded through private donations. It's cost-effective, Hockensmith said, because most of the work is done by volunteers.

Cumberland County's CASA program has 66 volunteers and costs about \$150,000 a year to run, according to director Anita Brewster, one of three paid employees and the only full-time employee.

The volunteers carry a lot of responsibility, and the application to be considered runs eight pages and must include a short autobiography, an interview, a background check and at least three references. The volunteers receive 40 hours of training and must write reports and document all their observations. They must commit to at least two years in the program, since it often takes that long for court proceedings.

National data reflect the success of the program. A U.S. Department of Justice study in 2006 showed children in CASA cases spend less time in long-term foster care and are half as likely to re-enter the child welfare system. They are twice as likely to be adopted if they are eligible for adoption.

Hockensmith is convinced that tales of deaths or severe abuse at the hands of caregivers would be lessened if more children were matched with CASA volunteers.

Wiser, with 30 years of experience in child care, has been a volunteer with CASA for about four years. Helping children such as Jordan, J.T. and Riley has made it worth it, although "sometimes you struggle about whether you make the right decision," she said.

Jordan napped on the couch while J.T. put together a jigsaw puzzle recently as Wiser visited the Stoup home. The Stoups, with four biological children ages 13 to 23, have fostered both girls since they were infants and adopted Jordan when she was nine months old and J.T. at two months. That was when "Linda determined it was not in the best interest of the children" to return to their parents, Stoup said.

"When we had Jordan, I didn't know what the outcome would be, but I wouldn't change anything for the world," she said.

Sometimes a family just needs help getting over hard times and learning how to be parents, Wiser said. At Campbell and Thompson's home, photos of Riley cover the walls.

Riley was taken from his home when he was 3 months old and the couple was having problems. But both parents were determined to get their son back.

"We had problems, but people helped us out a lot," Thompson said.

Wiser said Riley's parents attended parenting classes, never missed a supervised visit and put support systems in place for when they needed help. They reunited with their son slowly, starting when he was 10 months old, first for two nights a week, then three, then a month, while Wiser kept an eye on their progress.

They are now getting Riley evaluated for some speech delays and are enrolling him in a preschool program.

"I didn't know about being a father, I didn't know what to expect," Campbell said. "I do a lot differently now. I know how to deal with Riley when he's upset or cranky. It was really important for me to get him back. That was the main thing. I knew I had to be there for him."

Also hanging on the walls of their home are dream catchers, and Thompson has plenty of dreams for Riley.

"I hope he has a really good life, that he's smart, that he has lots of friends and goes to college," she said. "He has a mommy and daddy who love him."