

CASA program to pair children with advocates

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Michele Tierney knows a little bit about how hard it is out there for young, single moms; she was one more than 20 years ago.

So when she heard about a new Lackawanna County program designed to give abused and neglected children a louder voice in the courts system, she decided to see if she could help.

Lackawanna County got grant money five years ago to start the program, called Court Appointed Special Advocates, or CASA. Children involved in abuse and neglect cases are paired with a trained volunteer whose job it is to find out what's best for the child or children through interviews with foster and birth parents, teachers, caseworkers and others.

Volunteers may spend weeks or months gathering information about the child and the case before submitting a report with their findings and suggestions to the judge presiding over the case. The ultimate aim, whenever possible, is to reunify children with their natural parents.

"They're going to be a watchdog," said Lackawanna County President Judge Chester Harhut, who led the push to establish a CASA program here. "They are going to make sure we're not overlooking anything."

The CASA program began in Seattle in 1977 and has since spread across the nation. Before it could be established here, Judge Harhut had to find an agency willing to oversee the program, including screening and training volunteers.

Enter Advocacy Alliance in Scranton, which issued a call for volunteers in May.

The response it received was overwhelming, according to Mary Jane Yevics, director of court services at the Advocacy Alliance. About 50 people called to inquire about volunteering. Fourteen volunteers finished a 30-hour training course last month.

"I didn't expect such a big response," Judge Harhut said. "I'm pleased it's getting done."

The volunteers' backgrounds and experiences run the gamut, from a retiree who is already involved in a CASA program in Florida to Mrs. Tierney, a married mother of two and an Abington Heights School Board member. The former preschool teacher has been married for 15 years and, in addition to raising her son and daughter, volunteers at St. Joseph's Center.

Before embarking on the training, all CASA volunteers must pass a background check, complete a lengthy application and submit three references. They also spent about four hours observing family court proceedings.

Mrs. Tierney called the process a "real learning experience."

"In one court case, the parents were losing their child and they seemed so unaffected," she said. "As a parent, I couldn't understand. How can someone walk away from their child?"

So far, only a handful of volunteers have been assigned to cases. It won't stay that way for long, though.

Program director Shawna Salerno said all volunteers will have a case by mid-January, and a second group is being screened to be ready for the spring.

Ms. Salerno said she expects each case to last 10 to 18 months, with volunteers spending several hours a week interviewing participants and spending time with the child or children before filing a report with their recommendations.

"Our role is to give the child a voice," Mrs. Tierney said.

Contact the writer: enissley@timeshamrock.comVolunteers reach 240,000 children

Last year, nearly 60,000 Court Appointed Special Advocates served 240,000 abused and neglected children in more than 900 communities nationwide.

A 2006 audit of the National CASA Association by the office of the inspector general found that only about 13 percent of children who had a CASA volunteer spent more than three years in foster care, compared to 27 percent of all children in foster care.

The same audit found less than 10 percent of children served by CASA ended up re-entering the court system, compared to 16

percent of all foster children.

For more information on Lackawanna County's CASA, call the Advocacy Alliance at 342-7762 or visit www.theadvocacyalliance.org

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