

Ladies and Gentlemen, my name is Sanne Specht. I am the director of CASA of Josephine County. And I am so grateful to Representative Lily Morgan for speaking on our behalf before you this morning.

We are proud to state that CASA of Josephine County – the original pilot CASA program, along with Multnomah County, for the state of Oregon – has been doing vital work on behalf of our community’s most vulnerable children for more than three decades.

Now, more than ever, our CASAs are needed to ensure the health, safety and welfare of a very vulnerable population. These children are already navigating a whirlpool of adverse childhood experiences and pain because of unfathomable trauma – and they are now caught in the ripple effects of the COVID-19 virus.

Due to the lockdown mandated by the State as a protection against the deadly outbreak of the coronavirus, we are facing an outbreak of another sort. With the closure of schools and cancellation of youth programs, there are fewer eyes and ears on children. The result is an inevitable higher incident of child abuse and neglect.

Even in “normal” times, Child Welfare Services, courts, and mental health programs are overwhelmed with juggling a caseload that at times can mean the difference between life and death for hundreds of our community’s most vulnerable children - ages birth to 18. These children are victims of abuse (emotional, mental and physical), neglect and abandonment. They are witnesses to domestic violence, illicit drug use and criminal behaviors.

These children need someone who can act as a bridge between all these entities and ensure their best interests. CASAs are that bridge, that calm in the storm.

The COVID-19 lockdown has meant the cancellation of virtually all of CASA's community fundraisers. We are working hard to find ways to make that up. But, now, more than ever, we are reliant upon the State’s funding to allow us to recruit, train and support our CASAs. Our volunteer advocates are especially needed in light of the anticipated wave of new cases that will soon flood the courts.

The CASA’s insight and observations are highly regarded by judges presiding over Family Court, as well as the County’s Citizen Review Boards which scrutinize each case.

Because of caseloads, a child's attorney and the caseworker cannot always carve out the time needed to have adequate face-to-face visits with the child in the home and school, or talk with all those involved with the child, including foster parents, caregivers or birth families, or participate in the child's activities and events.

My staff and I spend our days and nights helping these amazing community members who give so generously of the time and talents. Our lives are a constant stream sifting and sorting through the worst kinds of trauma. But we are so grateful for the opportunity to support these local heroes.

In the past fiscal year, our 50 CASA advocates supported 168 foster children, volunteered 4,100 hours and drove 31,113 miles to do their work. We have seen many cases closed as children were returned to their parents, or were adopted into new homes. But Josephine County also had 107 new kids come into care during that time. So we continue to recruit and train and support our amazing advocates.

CASAs are court-appointed and become a legal party to the child’s case. They are the ONLY person involved in the child’s case whose sole duty is to advocate for the child’s best interest. Child Welfare must navigate parental rights, every-changing policies and an overload of cases. The child’s attorney must advocate for what the child says he/she wants - and cannot deviate even if they know the child’s choices could be dangerous to the child. The parents’ attorneys are fighting for their rights, often in direct conflict with the child’s rights or best interests. We are the only party who strictly fights for what is best for the child – in court and in the community.

Tammy Asnicar, local Kiwanis member and freelance journalist, has been a CASA for five years.

Tammy has seen the pain in a local teen's eyes as he battles depression, anxiety, anger and remorse because of the trauma inflicted on him by the adults who were supposed to protect and care for him. Tammy became a legal party to his case as his CASA advocate days after he was rejected by his adoptive family. He was subsequently shuffled between foster homes and schools. He has been in and out of several different programs and shelters. He has had more social workers than she or he can count. But during it all he has had just one CASA who has stood by his side. Tammy.

Tammy has also witnessed a miracle. After a 20-year battle with drug and alcohol, domestic violence, homelessness, suicidal tendencies and the loss of her five older children, this teen's mother has completed her drug treatment program, engaged in mental health services, earned her GED, secured a good job, landed an apartment, and been reunited with her older children all within a year. Most importantly, her youngest child has been able to remain in her care and avoid the trauma her older son endured. This mom is older, wiser and now stable. She is reaching out to her older son who she never stopped loving, and who never stopped loving and missing her. This mother has stated her success is in part due to the support of her children's CASA. Tammy is someone who believed in her and who cared about her children's welfare, she said.

Another of our CASAs, Alicia Krawczyk (pronounced Craw-sick), MSW, CSWA. Alicia was a former Child Welfare Worker in Josephine County. During her time as a Caseworker, Alicia unfailingly requested a CASA be assigned to every child in her caseload. She once said that she truly believed that the only child truly safe in foster care is one who has a CASA. Alicia has since left that position, and has returned to her work as a CASA, and is now also a foster parent. I would like you to hear her experience of CASA in her own words:

To whom this may concern,

I am writing you today to express the critical roles that CASA of Josephine County plays in our community through my experience as a CASA and a previous DHS Child Welfare caseworker. Granting CASA with funding will promote wellness and growth in our community as we continue to advocate for the children that are the future of our community.

In early 2015, I had the honor to sit with our director, Sanne Specht, as she told me about the CASA program here in Josephine County. I learned quickly that CASA played a much larger role in our community than I realized. That day I chose to say YES! I said 'yes' to the most vulnerable children in our community because they deserve it. I also knew that if I want to see a change in my community where I planned on starting my family – I needed to advocate for the children in my community that will be the face of our community. Shortly after my initial meeting, I had the honor to be sworn in as a CASA; a day that I will cherish for years to come. My first case was quickly assigned - because you may not know it but there are on average 400 children in foster care in Josephine County that need a voice.

As a CASA, I have the opportunity to be the voice for these children. My first case was two infants who had no one to speak on their best interest until I was assigned. They had been exposed to substance use and violence before they even entered the world. They needed a voice and I got to be their voice. There are many children similar to these two babies in foster care. An overburdened child welfare system is unable to be the voice of these children - especially when they must focus on the rights of the parents even when it's not in the best interest of the children. Who is responsible to ensure the children's rights weren't overlooked – the right to be safe, the right for loving stable home, the right to be with their

siblings or at least visit their siblings, or the right not to sit in foster care for months or years as the system works with the parents and forgets these children are growing up with uncertainty and a standardized plan set by laws and don't consider the best interest of the children? The CASA is that one person. And he or she is assigned to the child's case to do just that.

In July 2016, I stepped down as a CASA and became a caseworker for DHS Child Welfare believing that I could make a bigger impact. I desired to make a change in a broken system; thinking maybe internal changes could switch the focus more on the children. But I quickly learned the limitations as a caseworker. I was restricted by policy and procedure to focus on the interest of the children. I held children countless times while they cried because their parents didn't show up. I was required to continue to set up visits knowing these parents weren't going to show up because it was their right - despite the repeated trauma that was inflicted on these children.

I would beg for CASAs to be assigned to my cases because I knew they would be able to speak up for these children. CASA was able to speak up for the children that were being returned to a parent with little sobriety and who was likely to relapse. The CASA was able to advise the court and attorneys and DHS that slowing down the return could reduce the likelihood of the children returning back into foster care. The CASA was able to speak up for the little baby remained in foster care where little movement toward permanency had happened because no one had seen the parents for at least 6 months. The CASA was able to speak up for the children whose parents had done all the right things and should be returned to their home. The CASA is able to advocate for the best interest of children whether be more visits with a parent, returning to a parent, or to be adopted by their current foster care provider or other adults who can provide that safe, permanent, loving home.

In October 2019, I left DHS Child Welfare as I realized the restrictions of policy and procedure prevented me from advocating for these vulnerable children in my community. I returned to my role as a volunteer CASA without hesitation because I know the critical role CASA plays for each child in foster care.

CASA is the heart of this community when it pertains to the children we serve. Of any organization that deserves support to continue to provide a positive long lasting impact on our community, it is CASA.

Sincerely,

Alicia Krawczyk, MSW, CSWA