

April 20, 2023

To the Co-Chairs Senator Steiner and Representative Sanchez and the committee members,

I am Heather Dion and I have the pleasure to serve as the Executive Director of CASA of Central Oregon. Our organization recruits, trains, and supports community volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) to advocate for children in foster care in Crook, Deschutes, and Jefferson counties. Simply put, a CASA volunteer is an ordinary person who has an extraordinary impact for children in foster care.

I am asking you to continue funding court appointed special advocate programs in Oregon. We are one of 19 local nonprofit and one Tribal CASA programs in the state. Collectively, we will serve approximately 4,800 Oregon children who have experienced abuse or neglect in all 36 counties. Our organization expects to serve more than 375 of Central Oregon's most vulnerable children with personalized advocacy from their own individually assigned CASA volunteer.

In 2021, this body increased funding to CASA programs for the first time in 15 years. We are very grateful for your support. The increased funding has meant that we were able to serve nearly 85% of children in foster care in Central Oregon. This support is imperative to children who have experienced abuse and neglect. National studies have shown that a child with a CASA volunteer fares better during their time in foster care. A child with a CASA is more likely to receive all court-ordered services, they are more likely to stay in school, and they are less likely to re-enter foster care after their case closes.

This impact is in part because a CASA is the only person in a child's life who is solely focused on their best interest during their time in foster care. An Oregon child usually has one volunteer CASA for the entire length of the case – even when there are multiple caseworkers, attorneys, teachers, and foster parents involved.

Our courts rely on CASA volunteers. Judges rely on their unique perspective because volunteers have the time to really get to know a child and can report the important details of what makes that child unique. Oregon state statute mandates of a CASA for every child in state care (ORS 419B.112). Without adequate funding to support additional volunteers, we are unable to meet this mandate and our goal of serving all children in foster care with personalized advocacy.

CASA's structure leverages state funds into a force-multiplier. Each paid staff position supports 30 or more volunteers who advocate for more than 75 children. In 2022, our volunteers provided 10,000 hours of service to children in Central Oregon. At the Independent Sector's estimated volunteer rate of \$29.95 per hour, this equates to \$318,740 in services provided by CASA volunteers.

Please allow us to continue our essential service to children and families. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Heather Dion
Executive Director
CASA of Central Oregon