



CASA

Court Appointed Special Advocates
FOR CHILDREN

LOUISIANA

Becoming the “Chance” for Louisiana’s Youth

By Judge (Ret.) Kathleen Stewart Richey

Lawyers understand the anxiety associated with going to court. Imagine being 7 years old, removed from your home by a child welfare worker and going to court alone! You are taken to a building you have never been in, where there are a lot of adults in suits, all seeming to be in a hurry and using words you don’t understand. Then you are led into the courtroom where another adult, dressed in black, is sitting at a desk that is higher than everyone else and this is the person who will decide if you can go home. It can be overwhelming. About 6,000 Louisiana children are in this situation each year.

Judges understand the importance of the decisions they are making. The child’s safety, and sometimes their lives, depends on the soundness of the court’s decision. The child and his or her family will be impacted for generations. Judges worry that they are not receiving all the information needed for a sound decision. That very concern is what led Judge David Soukup to create CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) in Seattle in 1977. In 1985, the first CASA program in Louisiana began in New Orleans. Today, there are 17 local CASA programs serving 41 of 42 Judicial Districts in the state.

Court Appointed Special Advocates are community volunteers trained by local CASA programs in the basics of the child welfare system, court processes and child development. They are then appointed by a juvenile judge and assigned to the case of one child who is in court due to abuse or neglect. These volunteer advocates get to know the child, gather facts about the case, interview the important people in the child’s life and then make recommendations to the court to ensure that the child’s best interest is considered. The objective is that every child finds a safe, permanent home as soon as possible.

Lawyers are particularly well suited to serve as CASA volunteers given their knowledge of the law and familiarity with court processes. There is a certain altruism in lawyers using their advocacy skills on behalf of a child in need. “Participation in activities for improving the law, legal system or the legal profession” is encouraged to achieve the aspirational goal of “rendering at least fifty (50) hours of pro bono publico legal services” per year (Rule 6.1). In addition to qualifying as pro bono hours, efforts are underway to qualify CASA advocacy work for CLE credit.

While pro bono hours and CLE credit might be a motivation to volunteer, lawyers who have served children as a CASA volunteer identify much more compelling reasons.

Sarah Ann Legendre, an attorney with the Law Office of Risley C. Triche, LLC, in Lafouche Parish, has been a CASA volunteer since 2009 and currently advocates for three children in one case. “Being a CASA volunteer is self-rewarding and a positive way to give back. While it is a time commitment, it is manageable particularly since there is a CASA program supervisor to pick up the slack when you need them. Being a lawyer with court experience makes it easier to speak up for a child and seeing the joy on the children’s faces lets you know that you have made a difference,” Legendre said. All of the children that Legendre has served since 2009 have found safe, permanent homes.

CASA volunteers do make a difference in the outcomes for the children they serve; they make a difference in the courts in which they serve; and they make a difference in their home communities. But the CASA volunteer gains as well. As Stephen P. Strohschein, a lawyer in the Baton Rouge office of Hinshaw & Culbertson, LLP, and a former CASA volunteer, noted, “I think being a CASA volunteer enables attorneys to help the most vulnerable in our community in a very real way, and with a time commitment that fits within their practice, like another file. But perhaps just as important, being a CASA volunteer opens our



Source: National CASA

eyes to the complexities and challenges that our marginalized neighbors and their children are confronted with on a daily basis — challenges that too often end up on the front page of our paper or as the lead story on the nightly news. So, the CASA volunteer will not fix all of society’s ills and may not bring about a Disney ending for the case, but he or she will be a better informed and more empathetic member of our community.”

Abused and neglected children have suffered unspeakable trauma and are thrust into a child welfare and court system that can be complicated even for trained professionals. These children deserve an advocate to ensure that their needs are met, to monitor the progress of the case, and to make a recommendation to the court that is in the child’s best interest. Every child deserves a chance — that chance just might be you.

To learn more about CASA or to

locate a program in your judicial district, go to: www.louisianacasa.org.

Judge (Ret.) Kathleen Stewart Richey is executive director of the Louisiana CASA Association and 2022-23 co-chair of the Louisiana State Bar Association’s Children’s Law Committee. She began her career as an attorney representing children in child dependency and delinquency matters. During this time, she served on the Children’s Code Project Committee which drafted the Louisiana law regarding children’s issues. In 1991, she became the first juvenile judge in East Baton Rouge Parish. During her 24 years on the bench, she was instrumental in establishing Capital Area CASA. She has served on several legislative task forces, most notably the Legislative Task Force on Legal Representation in CINC Matters which created the Child Advocacy Program in Louisiana. (krichey@louisianacasa.org; Ste. 240, 2051 Silverside Dr., Baton Rouge, LA 70808)

