

A voice for the voiceless

BY LAUREN POPE

Children enter into the foster care system for many reasons. Regardless of if it's due to neglect, abuse, or death of their primary caregivers, these children come into state care with little more than the clothes on their backs. It can be difficult for them to self-advocate, especially when they're very young. That's where Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) come in. CASAs exist to "advocate for timely placement of children in permanent, safe and stable homes."

Serving as a CASA is a volunteer position. "A big misconception is that you can't do it if you have a full time job," explains CASA volunteer Marjorie Torres. "They're really good about working with you around your schedule though," she explains. Torres would know, she started volunteering for Capital Area CASA after asking friends and family for volunteer recommendations. After many people suggested CASA, she decided to look into it more closely.

"I worried at first about being boring!" she explains, "I had this idea that I needed to be super funny and engaging or one of those people who just jumps down onto the floor immediately to play with kids." Thankfully, you don't need to be "the cool aunt" to be a great volunteer.

"The children really just appreciate you being someone who cares about them - being someone who will always answer when they call. Having someone who they can count on that connects them to resources helps to break the cycle of abuse and neglect to give them the chance at a better life."



Marjorie Torres-CASA Volunteer.

Data shows that children who are assigned a CASA volunteer advocate are more likely to:

- Find a safe, permanent home
- Spend less time in foster care
- Have fewer moves between foster placements
- Do better in school
- Receive the services they need
- Avoid re-entry into foster care

GIVING BACK

CASA volunteers undergo extensive training to make sure that they understand how to accurately report the things that the children communicate to them to the court and how to ensure court ordered services are being provided to the child and their family. "It's really important that you just report the facts

If the child is very young, they might include the foster parent as well, but typically there are outings or visits with the CASA. Critically though, they'll never take place at the CASA's house. "That protects both the child and the CASA volunteer."



exactly how they're presented to you. You don't want to add your own commentary in," says Torres. These reports go to the judge who oversees the child's case, and are often a major factor when it comes time to decide a permanent placement. Of course, in order to write the reports, the CASA needs to spend time with the child. Depending on where the child lives (sometimes they are placed in group facilities outside of the Parish) a CASA typically meets with the child face to face at least once a month.

The CASA organization provides things like games, gifts, and even gift cards for fun events for the CASAs to use while spending time with the child. "They make it so you don't have to spend money out of pocket to do something special for the child." Torres has had four CASA cases in three years ranging in age from a toddler to a teenager. "You can request to be paired with a certain age range of child or gender to get the best personality match though," she says. Currently, there simply aren't enough CASAs to provide a volunteer for each child in the system.

If you're interested in learning more about becoming a CASA, call 225-379-8598 to schedule a date and time that works best for you or visit www.casabr.org.