





## Mission

Court Appointed Special Advocates of Northwest Arkansas provides compassionate volunteers who advocate for abused and neglected children. We are committed to ensuring a consistent voice, safe home, and promising future for children in foster care.

## Vision

Every child in foster care will have a fierce and skilled CASA champion by their side.

# Values

We value children above all else. In order to serve their best interests, we value commitment, compassion, truth, respect, and hope.

# Note from our Executive Director

## Last year, we celebrated CASA's 20th

**anniversary.** Our reflections centered on gratitude, growth, sustainability, and the future. As we approach the year 2020, when we intend to serve every foster child in need, we knew it was time to review where we are and where we want to be as an organization five years from now.

With the help of Milestone Leadership, formerly the Soderquist Leadership Center, our staff and board embarked on a strategic planning effort that spanned six months and included the input of more than 100 stakeholders. As a part of that process, our mission and vision were updated and our team articulated the values that have been guiding our work for decades. We decided to bring these values to life as we share our impact in this year's report.

There are no surprises here. We know exactly who we are and what we do. Abused and neglected children are our number one priority, and their best

interest is what guides us every day. We thank you for joining us in this critical work. You are indeed a symbol of commitment, compassion, truth, respect, and hope for these incredible children.

With gratitude,

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Crystal Vickmark







If you look up the word "commitment" in the dictionary, you will find a photo of a Court Appointed Special Advocate. Well, you won't, but you probably should. These volunteers show a level of commitment that is difficult to replicate, and they never receive a paycheck.

From the moment they express an interest in serving, prospective CASAs are put through the ringer. They must complete an information session, in-person interview, background screenings, reference checks, thirty hours of training, and court observations before they are ever sworn in for duty. That's more on-boarding that many employers provide! But, it's necessary to prove these individuals are committed and capable of this critical role. The last thing a child in foster care needs is one more person to walk in and out of their lives. They need their "someone" to stick with them during this difficult time and fight for their best interests until the next chapter of their journey begins. We couldn't be more grateful to the 330 individuals who served in this role in Northwest Arkansas this year. Together, they gave a voice to 847 abused and neglected children across our four counties. That is an amazing 14% growth over the year before. The real joy, however, comes when we celebrate the fruit of CASA's labor: the 138 children who were reunified with their biological parents and the 81 who were adopted by their forever families.

In looking back, we mentioned that our advocates aren't paid. That's not entirely true. While they don't receive money, they are paid with hugs from their littles and knowing nods from the teens they serve. And, they are certainly motivated by the knowledge that their time and commitment will reduce the stress and trauma these children experience and prepare them for brighter futures than their pasts would predict.

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# ompassion

It can be extremely difficult to find compassion for a parent who has abused, neglected, or abandoned her child. Yet, the primary permanency goal for every new Dependent/Neglect (foster care) court case is reunification of children with their parents. How can these feelings and goals coexist? In July 2016, a local mother, Brooke,

endangered her young children by leaving them with inadequate supervision. Battling drug addiction and an abusive partner, Brooke had been neglecting her kids for some time before the Department (DHS) finally took custody. Disgusted with herself and how her actions hurt her children, she felt so very lost.

Less than a month later, CASA advocate, Sylvia Chesser, took the case. She reached out to Brooke multiple times, but Brooke wasn't ready to receive help. Sylvia focused on the children and advocated fiercely for dental and medical services as well as sibling visits. But, at a supervised visit between Brooke and the kids, Sylvia saw something in Brooke - good parenting skills and a lot of love for her children. Sylvia had met other young moms like Brooke in her life and was hopeful that Brooke could turn things around to save her family. Sylvia continued to touch base with Brooke, and little by little, Brooke came around. Over the next year, Brooke addressed pending legal issues, regularly tested negative on drug screens, and found employment. Brooke worked incredibly hard to complete all the requirements of the court. But, it was not easy to do it alone. When there were dark days, Brooke shared, "Sylvia believed in me. She was the only one who made me feel hope."

In September 2017, Brooke's beautiful babies returned to her custody. Sylvia is an incredible model of compassion. She came to this case with an open mind, and it was that empathy that made a real difference. Brooke agreed,

"T'm not sure it (reunification) would have happened without Sylvia. She went out of her way to be available, resourceful, and encouraging. I have never met anyone like her in my life."





The eyes and ears of the court system. That's one way to describe a CASA volunteer. Beyond bonding with their CASA kids, the majority of an advocate's time is spent fact-finding. Does a child feel safe in her foster home? How is she adjusting to her new school? Did the biological mother successfully complete rehab? CASA volunteers are trained to ask questions, verify facts, and follow leads.

Sounds like an investigator, doesn't it? While CASA volunteers do NOT investigate whether abuse has happened, they do investigate what a child needs while in care and whether a child's biological family is capable of providing a safe and loving home. They share their findings with the judge in the form of a written court report at every court hearing. The report, which features background information, concerns/ assessments, and recommendations for every child on the case, is submitted as evidence by the child's Attorney Ad Litem. Items in question may cause a CASA volunteer to take the stand and testify under oath.

This system only works because it is based in truth. Our CASA advocates are sworn officers of the court. They track down information and verify it before sharing it with the judge. They dig up old police reports, confirm medical diagnoses, verify parent employment, observe parent-child visits, and locate missing school records. All the while, they maintain a strict level of confidentiality to protect the child and her family.

When asked the value that he places on an advocate's court report, Benton County Judge Thomas Smith shared "the overall value cannot be measured. I know a CASA often times fills the gaps that may not have been covered in a case by someone else...In Benton County, all of the stakeholders look to the CASA for the extra information that can move a case forward...That is why I strive to have a CASA appointed on every case."

# COURT REPORTS SUBMITTED



No two children are alike, nor are their families. Every one of us, in fact, brings a different perspective to daily life based on our upbringing, culture, and personal journey. That is why it's critical to understand the unique perspectives of the children we serve so that we can truly advocate for their best interest.

One way to do so, of course, is to provide our children with advocates who share their cultural identity. Unfortunately, the demographics of our CASA volunteers do not yet reflect the demographics of the children we serve. This past year, 89% of our CASA volunteers identified as Caucasian compared to 74% of our children served. Over the past three years, we have consciously expanded our marketing and outreach efforts to garner a more diverse volunteer base. While the diversity of our advocates has grown from 7.7% in FY2015 to 10.9% in FY2018, we recognize we still have a long way to go. If we can't provide the children with advocates who share their culture, the next best thing would be to arm our advocates with the training they need to be more culturally competent. That is the ability to interact effectively with someone from another culture by respecting their traditions, heritage, language, and family dynamics. Our preservice volunteer training addresses cultural competency in general, but some of our current CASAs have expressed a need for additional training to better serve our Marshallese and Hispanic/Latino children. We are excited to collaborate with two local organizations, the Marshallese Education Initiative and One Community Arkansas, to design and implement extensive, culture-specific training for our advocates later this year.

After all, it doesn't matter what culture, language, or community you belong to. Every child deserves the same opportunity for a safe and loving, permanent home.

## **VOLUNTEER ETHNICITY** CHILD ETHNICITY Caucasian 74.0% Caucasian 89.1% Hispanic/Latino 15.6% African American 5.3% African American 5.6% Hispanic/Latino 3.9% **Native American** 1.4% Native American 3.3% Asian 1.5% Asian 0.3%



"I don't know how you work with abused and neglected children. Doesn't it make you sad?" Certainly, a CASA's job is difficult and heartbreaking at times. But, knowing you can make a real difference in the life of a child brings hope to a situation where it's hard to find.

Meet Yasmine. Yasmine is not your average 21 year old. At 15, she found herself in foster care and at 18, she was still in foster care but **now** the legal guardian of her younger sister. She struggled to take care of herself and her sister, but she was determined to make a better future for them both. A few months later, CASA volunteer, Nancy Officer, was assigned to her case.

Nancy loved Yasmine and her sister instantly. She saw them as hard-working and responsible but also incredibly vulnerable to a system that wasn't providing what they needed during this critical time. Balancing a job in fast food while driving her sister to and from high school and soccer practice, Yasmine relied on DHS to assist her with rent and reliable transportation. When delayed DHS checks threatened Yasmine's housing, Nancy was there to fight for her. Over the years, Nancy successfully advocated for clothing vouchers, a Medicaid card, a passport, and transportation assistance for Yasmine.

But, Nancy's support of Yasmine didn't end with helping secure material items for her. Nancy has been a constant source of hope and compassion since the two met, years ago. "Nancy helped me be more responsible. She pushed me to get things done, like a mother would," Yasmine shared. When asked what her life would be like without Nancy, Yasmine said, "I don't know, and I don't want to know."

Yasmine aged out of foster care when she turned 21 earlier this year. Yet, Nancy's relationship with her is as strong as ever. No longer bound by a court order, Nancy still mentors Yasmine and has the pleasure of being a surrogate grandmother to Yasmine's baby boy.

As our interview came to a close, Nancy asked Yasmine to show me the tattoo on her forearm. "Hope" it reads. With a tear welling in her eye, Yasmine explained "there is a saying in my culture that hope never dies." With friends like Nancy, it never will.



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This year's success is due to the love and commitment our advocates bring to the cases they serve. Thank you to these individuals who gave of themselves to make sure our children's voices were heard.

Michelle DeRose

Juan Acosta Dawn Adams Melanie Alecusan Sarah Allred Lindsey Aloia Morgan Atwood Kim Autry \*\*\* Ron Autry \*\*\* Bryn Bagwell **Meredith Baltz** Sharyl Barwick 🖈 Joe Bebout Sharon Becker Tana Beenken **Gretchen Bellamy** Sade Benjamin Amy Bennett Christine Benson Kara Biggs Mary Blankenship Jeff Blaschke Kristi Blaschke **Taylor Bogle** Cari Bogulski Emily Bost 🖈 **Rik Brendle** Mandy Broadstreet Allison Brockinton Ashley Brown Wendy Byers 🖈 Diane Byram 🕁 Dave Caldwell Kim Carlson Diane Carnahan Carolyn Carney Lacey Carney **Belinda Carpenter Rick Carpenter** Shannon Carpenter 🖈 Natasha Carter Kate Chapman

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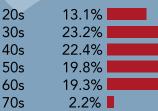
Jeremy Goucher Tiajuana Gough **Rachel Griffin Robin Griffin April Grimes** MacKenzie Grubbs Pam Grudek \*\*\*\* Karen Grumme-Rodriguez Jade Gustin Christi Guthrie Olga Hamilton Wayne Hamilton Karen Hamrick Susan Hantz Kelli Harris Shaniqua Hatton Pam Hayden Diana Hearn Mayra Herrera Linda Heter Sheila Heward Angie Hewat Sidney Hewgley 🖈 Holli Hill Morgan Hill Tammy Hill Brandie Hillian Teresa Hilliard Tina Hodne 🕁 Glen Hoffman Barbra Hogberg David Hogberg Julia Holland Melinda Holton Wendy Housley Jeff Howe Lon Hudson Marla Hunt June Hutton Abigayle Idhe Madison liams

am for the child

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## **BY AGE**



## **BY GENDER**



★ Celebrating 5+ years of service with CASA
★★ Celebrating 10+ years of service with CASA
★★★ Celebrating 15+ years of service with CASA

**Bobby Reed** Anna Regnier Ally Renner Angela Reyes Angela Reynolds Becky Richards Scott Richards Sue Richardson Maricruz Rivera Chloe Roane **Bonnie Rodgers** Marni Rogers 🖈 Scotty Roller Leslie Rouse Ron Rubay **Rosa Rubay** Kim Ruggeberg Mark Ruggeberg Michelle Rushano 🖈 Jane Ryan Cara Salvatore Kathy Sampson **Courtney Sanderson Carin Schoppmeyer Christine Scott** Jeffrey Seidensticker Angie Shadduck Tammy Simon Myra Small Danise Smith Tiffany Smith 🕁 Vicki Smith **Kesha Soule Erin Spears** Sharon Spurlin Kristina St. Sauver Neta Sue Stamps Lynn Stanberry Janet Steencken 🖈 Allison Steffens **Mike Steffens** Emily Stephenson Angelique Stevens

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Tracy Young

Mimi Stewart

**Richard Stewart** 

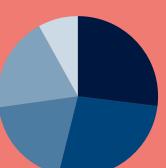
## BY EMPLOYMENT

54% 📕
13% 📕
16% 📕
13%
1.5%
1.5% 🛽
1%

Financials

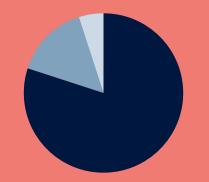
## **REVENUE\*:**

27%
27%
19%
19%
8%



## **EXPENSES\*:**





\*These numbers represent unaudited financials for the FY2017-18, ending June 30, 2018. For the most recent audited financial information, please visit www.guidestar.org.

COST PER CHILD:



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\*Term: July 1, 2017 – June 30, 2018



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