

CASA OF CUYAHOGA COUNTY

To: DCFS Staff
From: Thomas Pristow, Tamara Chapman-Wagner, Jacqueline McCray, Cynthia Weiskittel
Re: CASA of Cuyahoga County
Date: January 22, 2016

I am pleased to inform you that Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of Cuyahoga County will assign the first CASA volunteers to cases starting in January, 2016. As a key stakeholder in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems your support and assistance will be critical to the success of CASA of Cuyahoga County. This overview of CASA of Cuyahoga County is provided to address questions you may have about the program. Please direct any issues or concerns you may have to Ian Lucash at Ian.Lucash@ifs.ohio.gov or (216) 881-3086 or Cynthia Weiskittel at Cynthia.Weiskittel@ifs.ohio.gov or (216) 432-3334. In addition, Anne Konarski, Executive Director of CASA of Cuyahoga County is available to respond to your inquiries and any operational issues that may arise at akonarski@cuyahogacounty.us or (216) 443-6207.

How did CASA start in the United States?

In 1977, a Seattle juvenile court judge concerned about making drastic decisions with insufficient information conceived the idea of citizen volunteers speaking up for the best interests of abused and neglected children in the courtroom. From that first program has grown a network of nearly 1,000 CASA and guardian ad litem programs that are recruiting, training and supporting volunteers in 49 states and the District of Columbia.

Why are we establishing CASA of Cuyahoga County?

Though we have a strong Guardian Ad Litem Project, the needs of dependent, neglected, and abused children are extensive and CASA volunteers will be able to provide additional support and assistance. There are several areas that CASA programs traditionally are able to assist with including the following:

- CASA volunteers conduct more visits and spend more time with children than others giving these children stronger voices.
- CASA volunteers help to support and facilitate improved collaboration and communication among all of the service providers.
- Children with CASA volunteers, and their families, receive more court-ordered services.
- CASA volunteers and the program help to educate the general public about the needs of and required resources for abused, neglected, and dependent children.

What is the mission of CASA of Cuyahoga County?

The mission of CASA of Cuyahoga County is to provide qualified, trained, and supervised community volunteers to advocate for the best interests of abused, neglected, and dependent children involved in the Juvenile Court in collaboration with key agencies and significant individuals in their lives.

Which children will be assigned a CASA volunteer?

To start, CASA volunteers will be assigned to new Court Ordered Protective Supervision (COPS) and Planned Permanent Living (PPLA) cases. There will also be a Guardian Ad Litem assigned to these cases. CASA volunteers and Guardian Ad Litem will work closely together and offer unique approaches to representing the best interests of children. We anticipate expanding to other cases, but think it is important to start slowly, so we can identify and enact needed operational improvements before expanding.

Who will serve as CASA volunteers and how will they be prepared to serve?

Currently there are 40 individuals who have volunteered to join CASA of Cuyahoga County. Their backgrounds are varied including retired law enforcement, teachers, social workers, law students, medical professionals, and former foster and adoptive parents. The key minimum qualifications of CASA volunteers are:

- Be at least 21 years of age.
- Have access to transportation.
- Pass screening and records checks.
- Complete 30 hours of pre-service training and 12 hours of annual training.
- Respect and relate to people of various backgrounds and life styles.
- Communicate effectively, both orally and in writing.
- Keep information confidential.
- Make a two-year commitment to serve as a CASA volunteer.
- Spend, on average, 12 hours a month on each case and remain on the case until it terminates.

What are the roles and responsibilities of CASA volunteers?

- Contact with the child - The CASA will have regular in-person contact with the child where they live, attend school, and participate in community activities.
- Investigation – The CASA volunteer will conduct an objective examination of the situation by reviewing all relevant documents and records; interviewing the child, parents, social workers, teachers, and other appropriate persons; and observing the child in his or her natural environments.

- Advocacy – Identify and make recommendations regarding the best interests of the child to the Court.
- Facilitation – Identify resources and services for the child and facilitate a collaborative relationship among all parties involved in the case, helping to create a situation in which the child’s needs are met.
- Monitoring – Remain actively involved until the case is terminated and the child is in a safe and permanent living environment.

What was the process to establish CASA of Cuyahoga County and what are the future plans?

- Ohio Attorney General DeWine provided funding to Ohio CASA to enhance existing and establish new CASA programs in Ohio.
- The Guardian Ad Litem Project of the Cleveland Metropolitan Bar Association received funding from Ohio CASA to begin the planning process to establish a program.
- A 50-member Steering Committee was established to guide the planning and development process supported by GAL Project staff and consultants.
- CASA of Cuyahoga County became a program of the Cuyahoga County Juvenile Court when the Application for Provisional Program Membership was submitted and approved by National CASA Association at the end of June 2015.
- Funding has been obtained from Ohio CASA, the Victims of Crime Act, and The Cleveland and George Gund Foundations to begin operations.
- A process and outcome/impact evaluation will be conducted by Case Western Reserve and Cleveland State Universities.
- Planning is underway to join the Guardian Ad Litem Program and CASA of Cuyahoga County under a newly established not-for profit entity in 2016 so these program can be fully coordinated and integrated.