

## CASA officials talk legislative changes

By Dalondo Moultrie The Herald-Zeitung | Posted: Wednesday, August 26, 2015 11:25 pm

Coming off what representatives feel like was a winning legislative session this year in Texas, state officials with the Court Appointed Special Advocates program visited the local chapter earlier this week.

Sarah Crockett, public policy coordinator for Texas CASA, said she and others from the state arm of the advocacy agency visited New Braunfels on Monday to discuss new laws that will affect CASA programs across the state. She said the state representatives also came out to thank members of CASA of Central Texas, the local program.

“This was a very good session for child welfare over all. We had a lot of legislation passed that’s going to help improve the way the system works,” Crockett said. “The program in New Braunfels was pretty critical for us this session. They did a lot of calling their legislators and let them know what needed to happen.”

Court Appointed Special Advocate volunteers are appointed to children who are confirmed victims of abuse or neglect. Volunteers independently investigate cases and provide recommendations to family court judges, advising them of what is in the child’s best interest.

CASA of Central Texas advocates for abused and neglected children in the court system by recruiting, training and supporting community volunteers.

Crockett said the local and state groups discussed important changing laws and, in particular, two key pieces of legislation passed this year.

One was Senate Bill 1407, also dubbed the normalcy bill. She said volunteers with CASA of Central Texas provided much needed support by reaching out to their legislators to ensure passage of the bill.

Crockett said the normalcy bill will help children in foster care lead more normal lives and do the things other children their ages do.

“A lot of kids in the system end up not being able to do a lot of the things other kids are able to do like spending the night at a friend’s house or playing (organized) football,” Crockett said. “That’s basically because foster parents were calling caseworkers to ask if they could do that. The bill shifts the power from caseworkers to foster parents.”

She said state CASA folks also talked with New Braunfels CASA volunteers about Senate Bill 830, which creates an independent ombudsman position for children in foster care. The position will allow foster youth to make complaints and address concerns they have with the system, caseworkers, foster parents and more.

Before, the children felt helpless because their only way of complaining about something wrong with the system was to call someone in the system, Crockett said. The new law will alleviate those concerns, she said, and work from people in local programs like CASA of Central Texas helped provide the push

necessary to put these new laws on the books.

“Our volunteers locally have an interest in the legislative issues and advocating for our children not just in the local court system and in the local community but also at the state level where policy change can happen,” said Tricia Schneider, CASA of Central Texas development director. “Really to have lasting change and the greatest impact, those advocacy efforts have to happen at both the local and the state levels. We need our legislators’ understanding and support about the issues that affect children who are in foster care, children who are in state care.”

She said the key goal is to make life easier, more tolerable for children in Child Protective Services care, both locally and across the state.

“When they’ve been abused and neglected, they come from circumstances in their home environments fraught with so many challenges that when they come into foster care, things get layered on so thick,” Schneider said. “We’re just trying to break through those layers of those challenges for those kids.”

CASA is always in need of volunteers. For more information or if interested in becoming a CASA volunteer, call (830) 626-2272 or visit the website at [www.casacentex.org](http://www.casacentex.org).