

UW partner CASA a voice for abused kids

Recommend { 0 } Tweet { 0 } g+1 { 0 }

Posted: Tuesday, October 7, 2014 11:47 pm

By Jared Meisinger New Braunfels Herald-Zeitung |

Ralph Townshend can easily recall a number of heartwarming stories, such as the time one of the children he was advocating for asked him: “Is it ok if I call you grandpa?” Or when another child whispered in his ear, “I love you,” prompting a group hug with the four-year-old, his two-year-old sibling and Townshend.

Townshend, a retired Air Force veteran, is a volunteer with CASA of Central Texas. CASA stands for court appointed special advocates, and the organization’s volunteers are spokesmen for abused and neglected children who are removed from their homes and placed into foster care.

CASA’s volunteers work with Child Protective Services and the court to find a safe and permanent home for each child. Last year, there were 243 children in CPS care in Comal County, and CASA served 175 of them, or 72 percent.

Each child is provided an attorney, but the number of cases each attorney is assigned makes it tough for them to focus all of their attention on every case.

Eloise Hudson, CASA’s community relations coordinator, said every three months the child, parents, CPS worker, attorney and a CASA volunteer meet with a judge to discuss where to go from there. But the judge who makes the decisions covers seven counties, “so (the judge) literally has thousands of children to make those decisions for,” she said.

Hudson said the judge only sees the children for around 20 minutes every three months, so it is tough for him or her to make decisions regarding therapy, family visitation and counseling.

That is where CASA comes in. CASA volunteers see the children on an ongoing basis and provide information to the judge. The courtroom is “where the volunteers can really make a difference,” Hudson said.

“The CASA is a common thread that helps, in a constant role, with the children,” Townshend said. “It’s somebody they can look to, it’s somebody they can be with, it’s someone they can ask questions and feel comfortable with, and it’s someone that is there for them, whether it be in the courtroom or outside of it,” he said.

The volunteers are unpaid and have no special interests other than what is best for the kids.

“We want to make sure the kids are in a safe, permanent home because kids want to be with someone they trust, rather than just being placed in foster care,” said Norma Castilla-Blackwell, executive director of CASA of Central Texas.

Townshend said the end goal is reunification of the children and their parents, and he has been successful in three of his four cases. He said the cases used to drag on for “eons,” which was unfair to the children, but with CASA’s help they now typically last for about a year.

CASA employs supervisors, each of whom oversee 30 volunteers. Townshend said without the supervisors, volunteers would be “totally lost.” He said the supervisors make the volunteers feel “safer, more confident and more reliable.” In short, they are a safety net.

Hudson said while the goal is to represent 100 percent of the children in CPS care, CASA only appoints volunteers to one case at a time so they do not become overwhelmed and can focus on each case.

The only way to reach the 100 percent goal is to get more volunteers, as the organization can only serve as many children as they have volunteers. Free training courses for volunteers begin at the end of October in New Braunfels and San Marcos.

After completing the initial 40 hours of training and passing the background checks, each volunteer completes an additional 12 hours of training per year — and usually puts in around 20 to 30 hours each month, depending on his or her availability.

Townshend said he was sworn in at 11 a.m. in April 2010 and had a case by 2 p.m.

Castilla-Blackwell said other than being 21 years old, passing the background checks, and completing the training, the only requirement to be a volunteer is “having a big heart.”

Established in 1985, CASA of Central Texas is part of a state- and nationwide network of close to 1,000 CASA programs, but is its own organization with a separate nonprofit status. “The money that comes in here stays here,” Hudson said.

CASA of Central Texas is, in part, funded by the United Way of Comal County. Castilla-Blackwell said the United Way is “instrumental” in her organization’s success, as the funding helps pay for all of the background checks and the salaries of the supervisors.

CASA of Central Texas is one of 27 agencies the United Way of Comal County funds in part or in whole, awarding around \$700,000 in grants this year. This weekend’s Gruene Music and Wine Festival is the single biggest fundraiser of the year for the United Way of Comal County.

Recommend { 0 } Tweet { 0 }  { 0 }

© Copyright 2014, The Herald-Zeitung. All rights reserved. A Southern Newspapers publication | [Terms of Use](#)

