

SUNDAY NEWS

In best interests of the children

*To help abused and neglected, county
gets 'court appointed special advocates.'*

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She doesn't remember much about the first time she was removed from her mother's home because she was only 3.

But the second time it happened she was about 9 or 10, and she remembers. She remembers her confusion about why she was separated from her mother; she remembers how the separation seemed to come out of the blue.

"It was so abrupt, I didn't really understand why," said the local woman, whose name

is being withheld to protect her privacy. "You carry that with you."

Her mother had substance abuse problems that rendered her incapable of caring for any of her 10 children.

So, more than once as a youngster, this young woman, who's now 22, was thrust into the often-bewildering world that is the juvenile dependency court system, which is charged with deciding who should care for children who are victims of abuse or neglect.

The child-welfare system makes high-stakes decisions

Please see **CHILDREN**, page A10

Children: Advocates

Continued from A1

about the lives of children, but it is overloaded, nearly everyone agrees. And sometimes, in this overloaded system, the voices of children — who are supposed to be at the heart of it all — are reduced to whispers.

Some Lancaster County judges and child advocates are working to make sure that children's voices are better heard.

At noon Friday, on the steps of the county courthouse, they will launch CASA of Lancaster County at a "Light of Hope" ceremony scheduled to coincide with National Child Abuse Prevention Month.

Trained volunteers

CASA stands for Court Appointed Special Advocate. These advocates are trained volunteers, who are assigned to represent the best interests of a child, as that child's case wends its way through the dependency court system.

The CASA program was founded in Seattle in 1977 by Superior Court Judge David Soukup, who worried he wasn't getting all of the information he needed to ensure the long-term welfare of the children who came through his courtroom.

The Seattle judge enlisted community volunteers to speak for abused and neglected children in court. In the program's first year, 110 CASA volunteers worked with 498 children in 376 dependency cases.

The CASA program soon spread to other communities, and in 1990, Congress authorized the expansion of CASA in the Victims of Child Abuse Act.

Today, according to National CASA, there is a network of more than 50,000 volunteers who serve 225,000 abused and neglected children through more than 900 local programs across the country.

There have been discussions about founding a CASA

program in Lancaster County for years. But in this conservative county, where new ideas sometimes are viewed with suspicion, this particular idea languished on the back burner until 2005, when Lancaster County President Judge Louis J. Farina decided the time had come to get things moving.

He met with a group of interested citizens and representatives of Pennsylvania CASA. He sought the input of judges and others involved in CASA programs in other counties. In 2006, Judge Leslie Gorbey agreed to spearhead the development of CASA here.

A steering committee has laid the groundwork for CASA of Lancaster County. A board of directors is now in place, and office space in Lancaster is being donated by Central Penn College.

What remains is to recruit volunteers, hire an executive director, and raise money for the program. In some communities, CASAs are publicly funded, but CASA of Lancaster County will be a private nonprofit organization.

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Lancaster has pledged a start-up contribution of \$6,000. Carol J. Gilmore, a member of the CASA steering committee, and now president of its board of directors, estimated that \$60,000 will be needed to get the program started. "In the best of all worlds," she said, if the money is raised, the program will be up and running by late autumn.

'Somebody to care'

Gilmore was an early voice, championing a CASA program in Lancaster County.

As a school principal in the Manheim Township School District, Gilmore has seen firsthand the stresses besetting children who are caught in limbo, as the dependency court determines whether they can be reunited with their biological parents.

In the late 1990s, she got a call from someone who worked at the CASA program in Berks County, asking if she had a contact at the Lancaster CASA. Intrigued, Gilmore researched the CASA concept.

"I got very interested, and some foster parents got inter-

MORE INFORMATION

For information about volunteering with, or making donations to, CASA of Lancaster, readers may call Carol Gilmore at 399-9955. The address of CASA of Lancaster County, PO Box 6293, Lancaster, PA, 17606-6293.

ested, too," Gilmore recalls. "We kept trooping into judges' chambers, saying, 'This is a really good organization.' This was a decade ago."

Gilmore said that in her talks with children who are in the system, a recurring theme emerges. "Too often, they don't have a voice," she said.

"They want somebody to care for them, somebody who's there for them," she said. "Some kids don't have anyone available to them."

A child in the dependency court system will have a caseworker, but that caseworker likely will have a caseload of more than 30 other kids.

Crystal Gingrich, executive director of Lancaster County Children and Youth Agency, said her agency receives more than 75 new child abuse cases each month, and more than 100 allegations of neglect and mistreatment.

So, Gingrich said, she didn't worry that CASA might encroach on her agency's territory — she welcomed the prospect of getting more help for kids, and served on the CASA of Lancaster steering committee.

Each child who goes through dependency court also is assigned a guardian ad litem — a lawyer who will advocate for the child through the court process. These attorneys generally represent an average of 120 kids at a time in this county.

Attorney Lisa McCoy is a guardian ad litem, who was also on the CASA steering committee. "This will be another voice for the children, another piece to the puzzle, and another role model for the child," she said. "How could you not support that?"

Improving the chances of children in dire circumstances is what matters, McCoy said. "There's no place for ego or territorial issues here," she said.

Difficult cases

The cases to which CASA volunteers will be assigned are

tough cases of child abuse and neglect. "These are cases you lose sleep over," said Lancaster County Judge Leslie Gorbey.

Unless there are aggravated circumstances, such as sexual assault, which preclude the possibility of a child ever being reunited with his parents, family reunification is the goal. For reunification to take place, parents need to show that they are adhering to a plan set out for them, which is meant to ensure their children will not be abused or neglected again.

CASA volunteers will be better placed than the caseworkers who removed the child from the home to speak to that child's parents — bluntly, if necessary, Gorbey said.

Each CASA volunteer will receive more than 30 hours of intensive training. Once trained, each volunteer will be assigned to work on one or two cases at a time (a case could mean either one child or a family of children).

The CASA volunteer will be charged with gathering as much information as possible about the needs and circumstances of the child. He may talk to parents, family members, teachers, health care providers, social workers. He may arrange for any services — speech therapy, for instance — he believes the child needs.

He will review all of the child's records, including school, medical and caseworker reports. He will prepare an extensive written report for the judge handling the child's case. He will remain on each child's case, for however long it lasts, and do whatever he can to make sure the case is resolved as quickly as possible.

The detailed information CASA volunteers gather, and the oversight role they play in a child's case, should help to speed up the process of getting children to safe, permanent homes, Gorbey said.

Dependency cases can be thorny and heartrending, and making the right decision for a child can weigh heavily on a judge. Gorbey said the extensive information gathered by CASA volunteers should help to bring clarity in complicated, difficult cases. "We only see this as a win-win," she said.

Role of volunteers

CASA volunteers need to have good observation and communication skills. When a

case is assigned to them, they need to make a commitment of at least 18 months to that case.

Wanda Noll, director of York County CASA, which was founded two decades ago, will be setting up training for the CASA program here. She said CASA volunteers do not socialize with the children to whom they are assigned; they don't buy gifts or attend birthday parties.

"The children they come to know have already had multiple losses in their lives. They've maybe lost their homes, their pets, even their schools. ... Our role is not to become somebody who eventually becomes another loss."

Moreover, she said, CASA volunteers have to suspend any middle-class judgments they may be inclined to make, when assessing a child's case.

"This is not a warm and fuzzy world they're going to enter," Noll said. "We need to be sure the volunteers are grounded."

She tells volunteers, "Leave your own standards at the doorstep. They do not help in this case."

If, for instance, a CASA volunteer enters a family's home, and there are roaches in the house, those roaches aren't enough to deem the house unsuitable. If, however, there's glass all over the floor, and exposed wiring, "that's a problem," Noll explained.

Children who have been removed from their homes usually "want to go home if things are different and they'll be safe," Noll said. CASA volunteers, she said, have to believe that families can make changes.

At the same time, she said, they need to be tough: They need to hold everyone — from the child's parents to the dependency court system itself — accountable.

As a CASA volunteer, she said, "You need to look at each case individually and look at all of the puzzle pieces ... because you're trying to put this puzzle back together for the child."

Gary Krentz, president of the Pennsylvania State Resource Family Association, which represents foster families, lauded the effort to establish a CASA program in Lancaster.

"From the child's perspective, I think a lot of frustration ... comes from not having a voice, and not having some

of their dreams and wishes come to fruition, just because the system's so overloaded," Krentz said.

Expediting the process of getting the child into a permanent home is vitally important, he said, noting, "The more times a child is moved, the greater the chances that the outcome is going to be a negative one."

Voice of experience

The 22-year-old woman who went through the juvenile dependency court system survived the turbulence that marred her childhood. She's now a senior at Duquesne University, eagerly awaiting graduation. She has overcome a great deal to get to this point.

After she was taken away from her mother when she was about 3, she was placed in the care of an aunt for five or so years. When she was 9 or 10, she moved back in with her mother, but the arrangement didn't last. She was removed again from her mother's care.

She was separated from a young sister she loved, and was sent with one of her brothers to live with her father and his girlfriend.

"We were a strain on him; he couldn't handle it," she said, of her father. "He wasn't used to being a parent."

After three years, her father dropped her off at Children and Youth, and just like that, "I was back in the system," she said.

This time, no one in her biological family could take her in. Her grandmother already was caring for several of her siblings.

She was placed in foster care, and she said, "the foster home I was placed in was really good."

She still remembers being 13, and feeling as if there was no one to whom she could confide her wishes and needs. "Always, they gave me a chance to speak, at any time if there was anything, but really at 13, you don't trust too many people," she said. "You don't want to just open up and share what's going on."

And you don't want to say anything hurtful about the people who are trying to take care of you "because you don't want to seem ungrateful," she said.

She said she thinks the CASA program "definitely will help" children, especially those who aren't as strong as she was. "It is something that is definitely needed," she said. ■

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