



Opinion

Spotlight: Volunteer advocates needed for abused and neglected kids

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Right here in our community, there are abused and neglected children who live in the shadows of our lives. She may be the little girl in your son's kindergarten class who had to move homes and change schools three or four times in the last year. He may be the lonely child at the park who doesn't join the game.

The foster care and child welfare system is full of compassionate lawyers, judges, social workers and foster families, but according to recent statistics there are over 1,500 children with pending abuse and neglect cases in the Tenth Judicial Circuit. This intense need can strain the system to the point where they are simply unable to protect the rights of each child.

This isn't just a problem; it is nothing short of a violation of their human rights. A child cannot defend his or her own rights, but a CASA volunteer can!

CASA is a national nonprofit organization which trains and supports volunteers to speak and act as advocates for the best interests of abused and neglected children. They are trained to work within the child welfare and family court systems and are appointed by judges to individual cases. With the help of a CASA volunteer, a child is half as likely to languish in the foster care system, and much more likely to find a safe and permanent home.

I have seen firsthand the transformative impact a CASA volunteer can have on a child.

But today only 30 percent of the Tenth Judicial Circuit children in need have access to a CASA volunteer. That's over 1,000 children who don't have an advocate. We are dedicated to ensuring that every child in the foster care and child welfare system has a qualified CASA volunteer looking out for their best interests. To do this, we need to more than double the 160 current CASA

volunteers in the five counties of the Tenth Judicial Circuit. Especially needed are volunteers of color, as African-American children are overrepresented in the child welfare and foster court system, and men.

Every child has a right to thrive. To be treated with dignity, and to live in a safe, loving home. Every child deserves a fighting chance.

Once grown, these former foster kids could be our future doctors, teachers and leaders. Coming through a period of vulnerability and fear, the child can then understand his potential and his rights. She will believe in herself. That is our opportunity and our challenge.

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I invite the people of Peoria, Tazewell, Marshall, Putman and Stark counties to stand up with me and support these children. Go to casapeoria.org and see how you can help make a difference in a child's life.

I am for the child.

Pamela Perrilles is executive director of CASA of the Tenth Judicial Circuit. She lives in Peoria.