

Help Keep This CASA Running
April 25, 2009

At the end of last year, there were 1,240 pending abuse and neglect cases in Peoria County's juvenile courts. "Our per capita number is higher than Cook County," says Chris Monroe.

Hurting kids is not the place to be No. 1. That's why Monroe wants to invite you into his CASA. In Spanish, "casa" means house. In the legal system, it means Court Appointed Special Advocates. Either way, CASA means shelter for kids who sometimes have none.

That's Monroe's mission now that he is board president of CASA of Peoria County. The numbers are daunting, but the stories behind them are worse.

"I'm over here crying because I really respect what our volunteers do," Monroe says. "What they do is so intense. And nobody knows about it."

Those who do are impressed.

"I know what they're trying to do," says Peoria County Administrator Patrick Urich. "They serve a critical function, advocating for a special population."

CASA is almost all volunteers, trained to get information and help guide kids through an overworked judicial system. Peoria County may not be able to give much money, but it does supply offices near the juvenile courtrooms. Started in 2005, it now has 38 active volunteers and 14 in training. CASA was able to help 107 children through the court process last year. But that's less than 10 percent of those pending cases.

"We need more volunteers, and we need more money," says 47-year-old Greg Birkland, who first donated two years ago and became a volunteer last year. "There are over a thousand kids that need my services."

Birkland has three teenagers in various stages of the court process, not to mention two grown children of his own. As CASA executive director Pam Perrilles emphasizes, this is not a Big Brother/Big Sister-style organization. She says CASA volunteers are "that extra set of eyes" in the courtroom.

"The judge refers to CASA as his 'extra boots in the field,'" she says.

It's a big field. Domestic violence and substance abuse usually are a factor in these abuse and neglect cases. The kids themselves may have behavioral problems as a result. There is a lot of information required - think state agencies, police, foster parents, medical background, multiple schools - and it helps to have the facts assembled and coordinated before court. CASA volunteer Mike Waters, 57, notes truancy reviews are 15 minutes each.

"They've got two judges working full time and two state's attorneys," he says. "They're not doing that fast because they want to."

It's a complicated task, but the goal is to get the child in a safe and permanent home as quickly as possible.

"Judges know," says 59-year-old CASA volunteer Gwen Hendrix. "They read and appreciate it."

Despite the need and the appreciation of many within the system, with only two full-time staffers and a budget of \$125,000, CASA has hit its limits. That brings it back to Monroe and his two-fold goal: Raise awareness. Raise money.

"Our No. 1 goal for 2009 is community awareness," he says, adding he'd also like to see the budget double to \$250,000.

Both goals should get a boost this week. CASA will raffle off two "Casas for CASA" playhouses, going on display at The Shoppes at Grand Prairie. And the group hopes to get 1,240 people - one for every abuse and neglect case - to link arms at 8 a.m. Thursday for "Hands Around the Courthouse," now in its second year. For more information, call Perrilles at 669-2939.