

## Volunteer Guardian ad Litem Program at Risk of Closing

Guardians *ad litem* (GALs) represent the best interests of the child in Juvenile Court maltreatment proceedings. They may be paid staff or volunteers. Volunteer GALs are recruited and trained by the nonprofit CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates).

CASA volunteers have become passionate advocates for children. And they often can spend more time with children than paid GALs, who handle large caseloads.

But as [this Neal St. Anthony article](#) describes, the state agency that manages GALs isn't allowing CASA to recruit new volunteers. Unless this changes CASA will soon die through attrition.

State leadership is appropriately concerned about efficiently supervising volunteers with small caseloads, and maintaining consistent quality. But 97,000 CASA volunteers operate in 49 states, suggesting that these challenges are manageable.

The state GAL board will vote on CASA's future this spring. We encourage them to keep this valuable program.

Listen to this blog and its accompanying podcast, including in-depth commentary and analysis, in this week's podcast, [here](#) or wherever you hear your favorite shows.

## Narrative for CASA podcast.

Today I want to talk about whether the nonprofit CASA is valuable and should continue in operation. CASA stands for Court Appointed Special Advocates and their website is simply [casamn.org](http://casamn.org). These are volunteer guardians *ad litem*, in contrast to the paid guardians that are employees of the court system. As mentioned, a guardian ad litem represents the best interest of the child in Juvenile Court custody proceedings. However volunteer guardians are only in Juvenile Court because they are used in cases that involve child maltreatment rather than custody issues.

The state Guardian ad litem program is part of the State Court Administration, and it oversees the operations of paid guardians who carry out their work at the county level in all 10 of Minnesota's court districts.

The national CASA program was started in 1982, and Minnesota started using volunteer guardians shortly after that. It's unclear when the CASA nonprofit itself was founded, some records point to 1982, others to as late as 1996, so it is at least 26 and possibly as many as 40 years old. As mentioned in the blog, there are currently about 93,000 CASA volunteers in 49 states plus the District of Columbia.

At one point CASA operated in Minnesota in five counties. Currently it only has volunteers in Hennepin and Ramsey Counties where they are no longer recruiting new volunteers. So the program which once had over 400 volunteers is now down to fewer than 120. The CASA

Executive Director, Gerard Bodell, estimates that there will be so few volunteers left in about two more years that program will have to close. Meanwhile, approximately 200 people applying to become CASA volunteers, generally from a more diverse population than in the past.

While most guardians ad litem in Minnesota are paid, the smaller corps of volunteer guardians offer some unique advantages. First, they help cut into the currently sizeable backlog of children who don't have a guardian. Secondly, volunteers generally have an average of two cases, though some take many more, which means they often have more time to spend on each child than the paid staff, who average 30 cases that include over 100 children. This by the way raises a natural issue for further advocacy, which is to get more paid guardians so they can get the caseloads down to a manageable level and spend a reasonable amount of time with each child.

Overall guardians, both paid and volunteer, provide an important and valuable service. As the CASA Executive Director said in a recent presentation to the state Guardian ad litem board of directors, children who have guardians ad litem are 50% less likely to reenter the child welfare system and have one third fewer placements, among a number of other benefits. So in general, the more guardians the better whether paid or not.

Speaking of Mr. Bodell, he came on the scene last spring in a situation unfortunately triggered by Safe Passage. We asked the then chair of this CASA board, who was also a supervisor in state GAL program, to do a presentation on CASA for one of our webinars. This led to her removal from that position. The idea was that she could not both advocate for CASA and be responsible for winding down the program at the same time.

At the time this seemed like a really bad development, but Mr. Bodell, who was a long time CASA volunteer, stepped up to take on the unpaid role of Executive Director. He has recently retired from a senior management position at the Target Corporation, and has excellent management skills. It is rare for a small nonprofit like CASA to have an experienced senior manager step in. He has already reinvigorated the program in a number of ways, including negotiating with the state to allow CASA volunteers access to the same communications from state and counties as paid volunteers. This has in itself cleared confusion on some cases as well as making CASA volunteers feel more a part of the program. He is also working on proposals to recruit more diverse volunteers as well as to be more selective in recruitment efforts, and to strengthen ongoing training and supervision.

Now let me switch up things a bit here and take the position of management on this issue. I think it would be a mistake to consider them the bad guys in this situation. No doubt supervisors and managers in the paid program have their hands full, given the large caseloads and backlogs of children needing guardians. So I imagine the state leadership is looking at the inefficiencies of supervising hundreds of volunteers who only are carrying one or two cases each.

I empathize with that dilemma because in my years as in government, usually as the chief finance and administrative officer for a county or state human services agency, I was always looking for ways to be more efficient, and particularly to free up staff from unnecessary or unproductive work so they had more time for the critical tasks. So I think the state leadership is simply trying to do its job and make the best use of their limited resources.

However, as pointed out earlier, the management challenges in blending a group of paid guardians with volunteers have apparently been met successfully since there are programs in virtually every state that have this issue. In addition the national CASA organization has training and best methods for doing this very task.

Also, when looking for efficiencies in my various human services management positions, I did quite a few cost-benefit analyses myself, and had to critique quite a few others. And one thing I noticed personally as well as from the research on these types of exercises is that analysts doing this kind of work frequently mainly go after the hard data that is relatively easy to get and quantify. This almost always shows that the costs of maintaining a particular operation are too high and the benefits too low to justify continuing. This is largely because the softer, more difficult to quantify benefits of the program, while very real, are often not given considered or appropriate weight. Once these are taken into consideration, the conclusion of a cost-benefit analysis often flips to expanding or maintaining a program rather than shutting it down.

In the case of CASA guardians, perhaps the most important hard-to-quantify benefit is that CASA essentially trains a group of citizens who become passionate advocates for children in child protection and foster care, as well as specifically for the guardian ad litem program. These volunteers have credibility with elected officials because they have unusually deep knowledge and experience in child welfare. There have been points when half or more of Safe Passage volunteers were also CASA guardians ad litem. They had personal experience with the problems with in the child welfare system and were highly motivated to help address them. Guardians have been particularly persuasive advocates when we as Safe Passage go to the legislature each year and promote our legislative proposals to improve child protection and foster care.

One dramatic example of this “soft” benefit provided by Mr. Bodell is a CASA volunteer whose family has a foundation that recently funded a \$12.3 million affordable housing project including 15 units set aside for youth aging out of foster care. This Guardian stated that the project never would have happened but for her experience as with CASA.

But more generally there have been thousands of volunteer guardians since the program began, many of whom have had some important but perhaps not visible impact on the children and families they serve. And, while hard to quantify, the stories that we have heard over the years from our volunteers who are guardians have convinced me that there is a huge advantage to the child welfare field of having these knowledgeable citizens involved.

The fact that Mr. Bodell stepped up and assumed leadership of the CASA program is really a gift, a kind that is rarely experienced in human services. So we think that the state should take advantage of it. Mr. Bodell has developed a three-year plan for improving and expanding CASA which includes strengthening recruitment, increasing diversity, and improving monitoring and oversight of the program. We hope the state GAL leadership and Board of Directors for the program will decide to support him in implementing this and see where it takes them. We think the likely outcome is that it will result in a robust partnership that will strengthen both the state program and CASA.

Rich Gehrman

Executive Director

Safe Passage for Children of Minnesota

1/28/2022