

The Amite Tangi-Digest

Amite, LA

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We, here at the Amite Tangi Digest, received an informational letter from Child Advocacy Services recently and we decided that this would be a great way to get the word out about their need for Court Appointed Special Advocates, or CASAs.

I contacted Donna Bliss, the recruiter for the Florida Parishes, about CAS and she was gracious enough to drive to Amite and sit with me to explain what Child Advocacy Services was all about. We sat for a while talking about CASAs and how great their need was for these special volunteers to be voices for children who have been removed from their homes.

As written in the letter sent by CAS, Child Advocacy Services is a non-profit umbrella agency that provides services through the CASA program, the Children's Advocacy Center program, and other services that support the mission to give Voice, Healing, and Security to children.

When a child is removed from their home by the Office of Community Services (OCS), that child's case goes to court. At this point, the child is paired with a volunteer known as a CASA who is deemed compatible for the child. That CASA will, for at least the next year, be the eyes, ears, and voice for that child. While OCS works with the parents to unify the family, the CASA begins working with the child. However, the CASA is not designed to be a mentor, but will help build a partnering relationship with the child to help build that child's confidence in adults.

A CASA will be the one to speak with foster parents, teachers, principals, school counselors and could even interview the child's family to make sure all of that child's needs are met. The CASA will be the one to help find what is in the best interest of the child, the least restrictive, most appropriate atmosphere. They will be helping the child in their journey to get back to a happy, permanent placement.

Child Advocacy Services and OCS have a great working relationship. Donna said that everybody has the same, common goals and that is to unify the family and make sure the child or children are taken care of.

In order to be a CASA, the volunteer must be at least 21 years old. Each volunteer prospect will have two criminal background checks processed, one through CAS and one through the OCS registry. The next step will consist of 40 hours of training to include document history, child development, cultural differences, how to work in a partnership with OCS, how to interact with schools, and even court report writing and terminology. This training will be to help the CASA prepare all factual information in order to help the judge, who is there to help the child. After the 40 hours of training, each CASA must attend at least four hours of court observation to see first-hand how things are done. Each CASA is then sworn in by a

Judge. Most CASAs within the Florida Parishes all hold down full-time jobs. CASAs will then work with a CASA Supervisor and receive instructions regarding a case assignment. These supervisors work with and guide the CASA through every aspect of meeting the child, gathering information for the Judge, and how to write a court report.

Donna Bliss emailed me more background information on the CASA program after our meeting, which was wonderful. She explained that the program came into existence in Tangipahoa Parish in 1986 by the vision of two local Judges - the late Judge John Kopfler and Judge Jimmy Kuhn. Child Advocacy Services manages the CASA program through 10 parishes, including St. Helena Parish, Tangipahoa Parish, and Livingston Parish.

There are close to 60 active CASAs within the Florida Parishes. However, there were 452 children serviced last year alone. There are currently 187 children who need a CASA. Can you see the need for volunteers?

Most CASAs are asked to only represent one case at a time, though some can manage two cases, depending on the severity. Each CASA should look to be committed to that child for at least a year. CASAs are never required to pick a child up or take them anywhere. They are not responsible for any form of transportation.

Please, become a CASA for these children. It really hit me that there are 187 children who do not have a CASA and are left to their own devices to let someone know what is going on with them. It really does take someone special to stand up and be a CASA. The CAS is in such a need for volunteers to be a support for the child. Donna said that they are in dire need of recruiting males and minorities, but no one would be turned away from volunteering their time and giving their compassion to help a child.

Classes only take place once per quarter. You should hurry though, because the next class is in Hammond on January 26. There are eight classes. They will be held at 1504 West Church Street in Hammond from 5:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Some Saturdays will be required as well. Contact Donna Bliss at one of the following numbers or email: the office number is 985-902-9583, the toll free number is 800-798-1575, her cell is 985-415-2169, and her email address is [dbliss@childadv.net](mailto:d bliss@childadv.net).

If you don't feel that you are cut out to be a CASA, there are many, many other ways that you can help Child Advocacy Services. They have this group called a Community Council. They help with handing out flyers, finding speaking engagements, working at festivals. Donna is looking for anyone who would be willing to allow her to speak about this wonderful program, so I'm calling out all of you business people and service organizations! Give Donna a call and let her share her passion for helping children with your employees or fellow club members. She gave me a ton of flyers and posters and brochures to put up in your office or business. If you want them, they're here waiting for you. Call me at the office 985-748-7156 and let me know. If you need more than what I have, call Donna. I'm sure she'd be thrilled to get them to you. Donna made a comment that I liked, because it shows that it's people who care about this program who help it fly. She said, "We're not trying to hard sell anyone. We just want a chance to give awareness." There's nothing to buy. No money to put out (unless you want to sponsor a child for one year at \$1541, 'cause you can do that too!). Just help me, her and the rest of CAS, get some volunteers for these children.

Michelle Gallo is the CAS Director of Community Outreach and you can give her a call at 985-902-9583 to offer your support and help. We have an office here in Amite, too. Stop by and see Sandy Chester, the Supervisor, or Bobbie Ross, the Senior Care Support, to find out what you can do to help.

Go on. You know you want to!