

**Joint Committee on Child Welfare System Oversight**  
Kansas CASA Association Testimony  
By Deena Gage, State Director, Kansas CASA Association (KCA)  
September 5, 2024

Dear Committee Chair, Representative Concannon, and Committee Members:

My name is Deena Gage, and I serve as the new State Director for the Kansas CASA Association. The Kansas CASA Network comprises twenty local organizations across Kansas that recruit, screen, train, and supervise Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA). These volunteers are appointed by judges to advocate for the best interests of children by learning about each case, engaging with the child, collaborating with the family and professionals, and providing thorough reports to the court. As of the second quarter of 2024, 20 local programs were serving over 1,100 children with 585 CASA volunteers across Kansas.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today on the mission and impact of the Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program in Kansas. Please see the video attached:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OlkOpaMb23M&t=11s>

The Kansas CASA Association's primary mission is to enhance the success of our 20 local program members across the state so they can advocate effectively for children in need of care. CASA volunteers are typically assigned to one or two cases at a time and provide dedicated support to children by thoroughly exploring each case. They talk with the child, parents, family members, school officials, doctors, therapists, and others involved in the child's life to gather facts and provide a written report to the court. This report offers detailed information and recommendations for the child's safety, well-being, and permanency. CASA volunteers remain on a child's case until it is permanently resolved, providing consistent support. For many children who have experienced abuse or neglect, their CASA volunteer is the one constant, positive presence in their lives.

**Background & Justification:**

Children involved in the Child in Need of Care (CINC) court system are victims of abuse and violence, neglect, or abandonment. At the end of the State Fiscal Year 2024 (June 2024), the Department for Children and Families (DCF) reported that there were 5,792 children in the Kansas foster care system in.<sup>1</sup> Many times, these children experience emotional trauma, neglect, sexual abuse, and/or physical

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<sup>1</sup> Foster Care Demographic Report. Department for Children and Families. 2024.

<http://www.dcf.ks.gov/services/PPS/Pages/FosterCareDemographicReports.aspx>. Accessed on September 5, 2024.

injuries.<sup>2</sup> These children often become victims of an overburdened child welfare system, a complex legal network of lawyers, social workers, and judges who are frequently overextended and unable to provide thorough, detailed attention to each child they serve.

Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteers train to understand the impact that trauma, domestic violence, substance abuse, and mental health have on child victims of abuse and neglect. They work closely with foster parents, mental health, medical, and other service providers, and case workers to ensure services are provided to mitigate these risk factors. Before starting their work, CASA volunteers complete a required 30 hours of training using the National CASA/GAL Volunteer Pre-Service curriculum prior to beginning work with children.<sup>3</sup> Along with this initial training, both CASA volunteers and staff are required to complete an additional 12 hours of continuing education on an annual basis.<sup>45</sup> CASA volunteers are also subject to multiple, in-depth background screens per the Standards set by the Kansas Supreme Court and the National CASA/GAL Association.

Kansas CASA serves a demographic of children who have been abused or neglected by those in a place of authority that is meant to protect and provide for them. These adults strip the child of their security, innocence, and sense of self, leaving the child's welfare to a court system designed to work with adults and an overburdened child welfare system that struggles to provide the child with love, nurturing, or consistency. Many of the families these children come from are in poverty, lacking resources, lacking community support, their families come from addiction or are repeating the cycle they were brought up in.

A CASA volunteer is a proven service for assuring children who have been abused and neglected have equal access to justice. Kansas Supreme Court Rule 110 lays out that the responsibility of a CASA volunteer is to provide a written report to the court to provide information on obtaining a safe, permanent, and homelike placement for the child(ren).<sup>6</sup> Research shows child welfare court hearing quality impacts case outcomes.<sup>7</sup> The CASA model supports the court hearing quality components of the breadth of discussion, depth of discussion, and child engagement through CASA Reports to Court.<sup>8</sup> The Kansas CASA Outcomes and Growth Committee tracks key indicators of CASA Advocacy on a quarterly basis, collecting data from all 20 local programs.

A CASA Volunteer is a proven point of stability for a child. Research shows the “powerful long-term influence of adverse childhood experiences [ACE] on physical health, mental health, substance use

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<sup>2</sup> IDENTIFYING THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF CHILD ABUSE. CASA of Montgomery County.  
<https://casaspeaks4kids.com/identifying-different-types-child-abuse/>.

<sup>3</sup> Standards for Local CASA/GAL Program. Structured as a Non-Profit. Standard 8: Volunteer Administration. Section C. 2020. National CASA/GAL.

<sup>4</sup> Kansas CASA Standards. Standard II. Section E. Continuing Education. Kansas Supreme Court.

<sup>5</sup> Standards for Local CASA/GAL Program. Structured as a Non-Profit. Standard 8: Volunteer Administration Section C Parts 6 & 9. 2020. National CASA/GAL.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.kscourts.org/KSCourts/media/KsCourts/Rules/Rule-110.pdf?ext=.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Richards, T., Summers, A., Gatowski, S., Fromknecht, A., & Ruben, J. (2021). Conceptual model of judicial decision-making and hearing

quality in child welfare (OPRE Report 2021-86). Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families,

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid; <https://nationalcasagal.org/our-work/the-casa-gal-model/>

*Kansas CASA's mission is to enhance the success of existing and developing Kansas Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) programs with sustainable resources, training, partnerships, and funding.*

disorders, and health risk behaviors in adulthood.<sup>9</sup> The number of ACEs are also known to be positively correlated with negative impacts on physical and mental health outcomes.<sup>10</sup> This negative impact can be mitigated through a stable relationship with an adult, such as a CASA volunteer. CASA volunteers are required to have direct, in-person contact with their assigned child(ren) a minimum of once every thirty (30) days, with many advocates visiting more frequently.<sup>11,12</sup> The Kansas CASA Outcomes and Growth Committee track CASA Stability (well-being) with the goal that, 90% of the children served by the CASA program will remain with the same CASA advocate during the year. The CASA Model is built around a stable and committed adult volunteer learning, engaging, and collaborating to advocate for the most vulnerable children.<sup>13</sup> The collective Outcomes Data reported by all 20 Local CASA Programs at the end of Calendar Year Quarter 2 of 2024, reported a 99% success rate of the child(ren) served by the CASA program remaining with the same CASA volunteer throughout the quarter<sup>14</sup>. The Kansas CASA Outcomes and Growth Committee tracks services through the “Number of Advocacy Contacts made in a month.” As of June 30, 2024, the collective Outcomes Data reported by all 20 Local CASA Programs showed CASA volunteers provided a combined 25,959 Advocacy Contacts<sup>14</sup> with the children they serve and others involved in the children’s cases from January 1 – June 30, 2024<sup>14</sup>.

Unfortunately, we live in a world where there will always be good and evil. At CASA we understand our advocacy will always be needed. Kansas CASA and our programs around the state know the importance of following due diligence to prevent an unnecessary separation of a child from their biological family. We are also aware that there are many unfortunate circumstances where there is no other option, and for the safety and benefit of the child, they need to be placed in state custody. It is in these situations that a CASA is most needed, the core intention of CASA’s creation by Judge Soukup: *Where all other measures have been taken and now the child(s) needs someone to advocate for their soul best interests*<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Association of adverse childhood experiences with lifetime mental and substance use disorders among men and women aged 50+ years. Cambridge University Press. Namkee G. Choi, Diana M. DiNitto, C. Nathan Marti and Bryan Y. Choi. 26 October 2016.

<sup>10</sup> The Role of Adverse Childhood Experiences in Substance Misuse and Related Behavioral Health Problems. SAMHSA’S CENTER FOR THE APPLICATION OF PREVENTION TECHNOLOGIES. June 2018. <https://mnprc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/aces-behavioral-health-problems.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Standards for Local CASA/GAL Program. Structured as a Non-Profit. Standard 8: Volunteer Administration Section C Part 5. Sub-Section g. 2020. National CASA/GAL.

<sup>12</sup> Kansas CASA Standards. Standard IV. Section K. Required In-Person Contact with Child. Kansas Supreme Court.

<sup>13</sup> <https://nationalcasagal.org/our-work/the-casa-gal-model/>

<sup>14</sup> Kansas CASA Association Growth & Outcomes Report

<sup>15</sup> Video of CASA Founder, Judge David W. Soukup <https://nationalcasagal.org/about-us/history/>

While we support family-first policies and prevention efforts, it is essential not to overlook the children whose best interest is removal from unsafe environments. CASA's primary mission is to ensure that these children are not forgotten by judges, DCF, legislators, or funders.

As you approach the upcoming Legislative Session, please remember our impact on Kansas' most at-risk children. CASA programs contribute significantly to the improvement of the Kansas child welfare system, giving the most vulnerable children the opportunity to grow, thrive, and make Kansas a better place to live, work, and raise a family.

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