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SENATE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

Testimony of Mickey Edwards

State Director

Kansas CASA Association

Chairwoman Baumgardner and Members of the Committee:

CASA volunteers can spend a great deal of time in advocating for the educational needs of the children they serve and in collaborating with families, school personnel, and foster care workers to see that educational needs are met. Of children in foster care, the US Department of Education reports, "A positive PK-12 education experience has the potential to be a powerful counterweight to the abuse, neglect, separation, impermanence and other barriers these vulnerable students experience." Research shows that children experiencing foster care are at higher risk of dropping out of school and lower academic achievement, and are not likely to continue into postsecondary education. The US Department of Education goes on to say, "A coordinated effort by education agencies and child welfare agencies is necessary to improve the educational outcomes for students in foster care." CASA volunteers work hard as part of that effort, and are often instrumental in the collaboration and coordination of these children's educational needs.

In performing the advocacy role, a CASA volunteer gathers educational information on the child to whom they are appointed. They speak to teachers, counselors, special education teachers, and other school staff members in making their comprehensive investigation. CASA volunteers participate in Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings, team meetings, and more to ensure they have all of the information they can gather and as part of their advocacy role outside of the courtroom.

CASA volunteers in our state watch in frustration as many children they serve are moved from foster home to foster home and school to school. Moves can be very difficult for children, even in the best of circumstances. Foster children are not moving under the best of circumstances. They are often being forced to change not just homes, but communities and schools and lose touch with those who have become part of their lives. When a school-aged child moves, that loss can be another trauma to them. CASA volunteers work to minimize moves, but often there is no way around it.

Lack of School Attendance

One of a CASA volunteer's frustrations regarding a placement change is when a child is not enrolled in school for weeks, sometimes months, following the move. Sometimes, this delay occurs due to lack of communication. Recently, a child with a CASA volunteer moved to a new community weeks before the end of the semester. That child did not start the new school for more than a week after the start of the new semester, resulting in several weeks in which the child did not participate in any education. In this particular case, the case worker relied on the foster mother to enroll the child and thought that the child had been

enrolled. CASA learned that, in addition, the case worker had neglected to request the records be sent to the new school.

CASA serves many children that spend days (and sometimes nights too) in case worker offices because foster homes cannot be found. Or, children are spending series of nights in different foster homes while placement is sought. These children are not enrolled in school because it is unknown where they will be living. One CASA child went without any school or educational services for 3 months due to a series of short-term placements.

Lack of Information to Schools

Another common issue is that schools have a lack of information on foster children. It is very common for the school to ask the CASA volunteer to supply information on behavioral issues and social history. Though CASA volunteers have a wealth of information, they are limited in what they can share with the school due to confidentiality requirements. Instead, CASA volunteers refer the school to the case workers for information. Case workers can be difficult to get in touch with due to their overwhelming caseloads. As a result, schools often don't have a good understanding for many days or weeks or longer of how best to meet a new child's needs during the school day. This can be a safety issue for the foster child and/or for the other children in the school.

Many times the lack of information to schools includes school records. It can take weeks, months, and in at least one CASA case (described below) over a year for records to catch up to a foster youth. CASA volunteers report that IEPs are sometimes slow to follow children. Sometimes a child's other school records may arrive without the IEP. This results in the new school not being able to continue the special education services as planned until the IEP catches up with the child.

Trauma Training Needed

Even with information, schools can struggle to keep foster children in their schools and provide them an appropriate education that meets their needs when behavioral issues are present. In one case in particular, an eight-year-old child's school day was abbreviated to 8 to 10 a.m. The school had little tolerance for any behaviors and would call the case worker frequently to pick up the child. It got to the extreme that once the child sighed in response to something and the school required him to go home for the day. While it is understandable that the school likely felt forced to send him home because he was a distraction to other students, it meant that the building blocks of an 8-year-old's education were not being provided. One grade-school-aged CASA child who was struggling with trauma in her life spent the entire school day in front of a computer in the school office as an alternative to the regular classroom setting. This "solution" was proposed by a teacher who did not seem to understand that a child cannot separate the trauma that occurred in their life with what needed to be accomplished at school. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) says, "A traumatic event can seriously interrupt the school routine and the processes of teaching and learning." NCTSN goes on to say that students who have experienced trauma "may have increased difficulties concentrating and learning at school and may engage in unusually reckless or aggressive behavior." It is important for school professionals to receive training on trauma and how the foster care experience can affect a child in school.

Mental Health Issues a Barrier

Mental health issues are a significant barrier to educational success for many of our CASA children. They often are not receiving the mental health therapy they need, although CASA volunteers advocate for this constantly.

Appropriate Alternative Education Options Needed

Some youth participate in only web-based education. Web-based learning has been bandied about as one solution, but children in foster care need MORE teacher interaction, not less. Giving some kids internet access can be dangerous and put them at greater risk for trafficking. Additionally, it denies them the opportunity to participate in some classes and activities such as music and the arts. One particular CASA youth had been playing in the band and singing in chorus at previous schools. When she was moved from one group home to another, her education experience changed from a traditional school to one in which she was walked to a room every day and sat in front of a computer monitor for six hours. Her education “facilitator” was a teacher in a remote location who never spoke to or met this young lady. The CASA volunteer successfully advocated that an exception be made to allow the youth to attend a regular school in order that she be allowed to have a normal experience and participate in music classes.

Education Advocates Inconsistent

When a child in foster care does not have a parent available to make education decisions, an education advocate is appointed. Many times education advocates, also volunteers, do not know the children to whom they are appointed and must spend time getting to know their needs. When foster children with an education advocate move, they are often given a new education advocate. With the high number of placement changes many foster children experience, this results in instability in the education decision-maker. One 17-year-old CASA youth has been in hundreds of placements in her 10 years in foster care, including many one-night stays and treatment facilities. She is involved in special education and has an IEP. In the first 9 months of 2017, she was in 15 different placements. She was in a group home recently and placed into regular classrooms, where she quickly became frustrated and was suspended. Seeing a need, her CASA volunteer choose to become her education advocate. CASA volunteers sometimes choose to perform that role for their CASA children in order to help with stability. CASA volunteers already spend a great deal of time volunteering as a CASA volunteer and many do not have the extra time to devote to being an education advocate.

Gaps in Learning

Children who move from school to school as they travel through foster care often have gaps in learning. Each child must have the opportunity to gain the knowledge they need in order to build upon for future education. It is common for a foster child who is new to a school to come into the middle of a lesson without the basic knowledge necessary to understand what is being taught. These gaps in learning can set a child up for poor academic achievement, especially when they experience these gaps multiple times in a school year.

One CASA youth who is 16 ½ years old has been in foster care since age 3. He has many behavior issues and has disrupted from many foster homes. He has been hospitalized on and off for most of his life. During one hospitalization at age 5, he was given a comprehensive evaluation that showed him to be a gifted child. However, he has never attended school on a regular basis. To exacerbate things, it has been a struggle to get

his school records to follow him, and some schools have never received records. After 1 ½ years, and much advocating by the CASA in collaboration with schools, Keys for Networking was finally able to secure some records. He currently has 3 credits, and has been reported as a truant child. The system has clearly failed this once-gifted child.

Need for College Help

A youth transitioning into adulthood from the foster care system is not likely to go to college. Kansas often fails in ensuring youth are prepared for living independently. Professionals and other adults in the youth's life can have a great influence – positively or negatively – on whether or not they pursue a college degree. Unfortunately, too many foster children leaving foster care do not have people in their lives that will give them the one-on-one help they need to overcome the challenges. One 17-year-old CASA youth living in an independent living facility was refused accommodations necessary to complete college coursework, for instance access to the internet in the home and extra time on campus to study and get assistance. The youth dropped out of college after only two weeks because she could not be successful without those accommodations. What a travesty! Many students who “age out” of foster care simply don't have the knowledge or supportive adults in their lives to navigate their way to and thru college. CASA volunteers are sometimes able to fill this gap. When they do so, it is outside their role as a CASA volunteer and must be pursued by the youth. But, not all youth transitioning from foster care have had a CASA volunteer, as there are not enough CASA volunteers to serve all children who need one!

CASA volunteers make a huge difference for children in foster care, and are in many cases the one individual who has the whole picture and has been involved in the child's case for the duration. This provides an invaluable voice for the child's needs, including in the education system. One KVC supervisor who speaks to new CASA volunteers during training always makes it a point to say that CASA volunteers can be most helpful when they focus on education because case workers simply do not have the time to devote to it.

Many of the issues identified in this testimony could be mitigated by providing a better child welfare system for Kansas' abused and neglected children. Better access to mental health services, more family foster homes so children don't move as frequently, better independent living supports after foster care, trauma training for educators, and slowing the turnover in case workers will all go a long way to improving educational experiences for children in foster care.

CASA volunteers are appointed to some pretty spectacular youth. With the support of CASA volunteers and others in their lives, many overcome obstacles, succeed in school, go on to pursue college degrees, and have happy, healthy adult lives. One particular youth with a CASA volunteer was determined to go to college. Here are the words of the CASA volunteer: “CASA and KVC were supportive. The student graduated with honors from high school and was asked to give one of the two senior graduation speeches at the high school commencement. The student went on to secure grants and scholarships to supplement what DCF offered. She is now in her second year of college and receives all A's and B's. The student's plan is to get an advanced degree and I have no doubt that will be accomplished. This was all achieved while working a part-time job.”