

CASA Fund Year-End Report July 31, 2021

Nebraska CASA issues this report to the Supreme Court, State Court Administrator, Clerk of the Legislature, and the Governor regarding the Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Fund. The CASA Fund was established by the 2011 Nebraska Legislature to recruit and train CASA volunteers, to develop new CASA programs or expand current CASA programs into areas not currently served and to create new and innovative programming for CASA.

Twenty local CASA programs in 52 Nebraska counties recruit, screen, train and supervise volunteers who are appointed by Judges to speak in court for the safety and best interest of children who have been abused or neglected. The Nebraska CASA Association partners with these local CASA programs providing leadership, quality assurance, training, technical assistance, and funding. The information in this report pertains to fiscal year July 1, 2020 to June 30, 2021.

The CASA Fund continues to move toward its goal to provide a CASA volunteer for every Nebraska child who needs one. Nebraska State Statutes and the National CASA Standards for Local CASA Programs require a minimum of 30 hours of pre-service training before a volunteer is assigned to a case. In addition, State Statutes require a minimum of 10, and National CASA Standards a minimum of 12, annual hours of continuing education for volunteers.

Local programs continue to use all forms of advertising, public events, community presentations, posters, local media advertising and stories, websites, social media, newsletters, yard signs, and word of mouth to recruit volunteers. Throughout the pandemic, the state association and local programs began increasing their use of social media and paid advertising to recruit CASA Volunteers. All local programs were required to move to virtual recruitment and training of volunteers during the pandemic. This required moving the 30-hour curriculum for new volunteer training to a virtual format. There were 256 new volunteers who were screened, trained, and sworn in as CASA advocates during the fiscal year. This is only 25 fewer than the last fiscal year, despite the pandemic.

Recruitment is vital to local CASA programs. New volunteers need to be recruited to serve additional children's cases and to replace retiring or redirected volunteers. Volunteers are asked to serve for at least one year after completing new volunteer training and to remain with a child until her or his court case is closed. Almost all volunteers fulfill both of those obligations and more.

Not all volunteers who are recruited are able to complete the training and/or be assigned cases. In addition to background criminal screening and reference checks, local CASA programs use our 30 hours of CASA new volunteer training as part of the screening process to ensure volunteers are appropriate for the job of serving as an advocate for abused and neglected children.

Nebraska has seen a 123% growth in volunteers serving children since the CASA Fund began. The pandemic resulted in this being the first year there was not an increase in active volunteers.

- 421 volunteers for FY 2011/12
- 480 volunteers for FY 2012/13
- 663 volunteers for FY 2013/14
- 726 volunteers for FY 2014/15
- 770 volunteers for FY 2015/16
- 815 volunteers for 2016/17
- 820 volunteers for 2017/18
- 886 volunteers for 2018/19
- 957 volunteers for 2019/20
- 938 volunteers for 2020/21

In this fiscal year, 103 volunteers left the program. This is 27% decrease from last fiscal year. CASA’s statewide focus on volunteer retention includes training for CASA staff in Reflective Practice and Mindfulness. The goal of the Reflective Practice program is to increase communication and the effectiveness of communication with staff and volunteers to increase retention rates. Initial survey results from training participants convey that CASA program staff’s communication with volunteers and ability to resolve issues volunteer’s stressors has improved. CASA Mindfulness training provides skills and knowledge to work through the myriad of challenges a volunteer faces in a case that a volunteer has no control. Volunteers’ number one complaint is the lack of responsiveness from others involved in the child(ren)’s cases. Mindfulness provides a way to deal with this frustration preventing them from leaving the program.

New and Expanding Programs

Southeast Nebraska CASA - This program, formerly known as Seward County CASA, has now expanded into Jefferson, Saline, Gage, Saunders, and Thayer Counties. The program trained 15 new volunteers this year. The program recruited through an increase in online marketing, partnered with other organizations, held regular recruitment events virtually then in person. The program also created a podcast called “CASA Talk.” The podcast now has 1300 individual downloads. The program served 87 children this year, 40 more than last fiscal year.

PlainsWest CASA - This program, formerly Cheyenne County CASA, expanded to serve Morrill and Deuel Counties. The program increased social media and radio volunteer recruitment marketing during the pandemic. The program increased their volunteer base to 31 volunteers this year. Six more than last fiscal year. The program now serves all children in their courts and provides courtesy CASA Volunteers to other programs who have children placed in foster care in their three-county area.

SENCA CASA– Formerly known as Otoe County CASA, this program became one of Southeast Nebraska Community Action’s (SENCA) programs in August of 2019. This partnership was created to determine if non-profit programs such as a community action agency could serve as an umbrella organization for local CASA programs in counties that have few children in care. Under SENCA’s management CASA services have expanded into four unserved southeast Nebraska counties, Johnson, Richardson, Nemaha, and Pawnee.

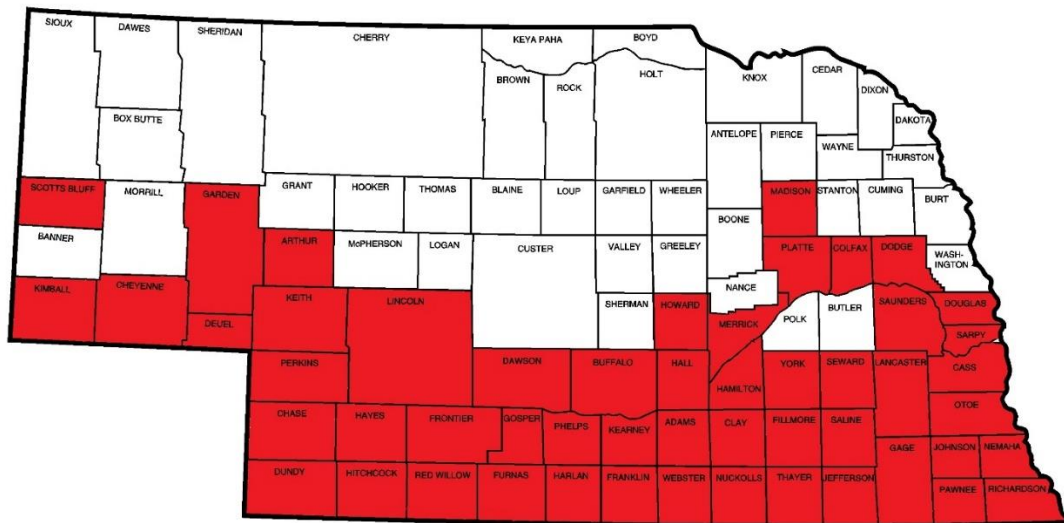
CASA of NorthCentral- This year Nebraska CASA worked with a former CASA volunteer to form this program in Holt County. It is now a 501c3 and is completing all of the requirements from the National CASA/GAL Association to receive membership. The program director and board of directors plan to begin by serving Holt County then expand into other unserved counties in northern Nebraska in future years.

CASA of the Midlands- This program was formerly the CASA Project of Dodge County housed within the County Attorney’s office. The program only served 3 to 5 children per year. Now their own 501c3 agency with a director and volunteer coordinator, the program has formed a board of directors. The program is increasing the number of volunteers to serve children in Dodge County and has now expanded into Saunders County. This year they served 68 children with 25 active volunteers, 10 of those children in Saunders County.

CASA served 52 courts during the year. This is an increase of 15 counties since the CASA Fund began. Local CASA programs served the county courts in the following counties:

Adams	Garden	Nuckolls
Arthur	Gosper	Otoe
Buffalo	Hall	Pawnee
Cass	Hamilton	Perkins
Chase	Harlan	Phelps
Cheyenne	Hayes	Platte
Clay	Hitchcock	Red Willow
Colfax	Howard	Richardson
Dawson	Jefferson	Saline
Deuel	Johnson	Saunders
Dodge	Kearney	Scotts Bluff
Dundy	Keith	Seward
Fillmore	Kimball	Thayer
Franklin	Lincoln	Webster
Frontier	Madison	York
Furnas	Merrick	
Gage	Nemaha	

Local CASA programs also serve the separate juvenile courts in Douglas, Lancaster, and Sarpy Counties.



2,162 children were served by CASA volunteers during the fiscal year. CASA program staff and volunteers were determined to not allow the pandemic to limit the number of children who receive the advocacy of a CASA volunteer. In fact, 28 more children were served than the previous fiscal year. CASA has increased the number of abused and neglected children served by nearly 73% since the 2011/12 Fiscal Year when the CASA Fund began.

A brief overview of some successes during fiscal year 2020-2021

The pandemic was not only CASA's biggest challenge of 2020-21, but resulted in some of the greatest successes. This includes all local CASA programs upgrading hardware and software in order to recruit and train volunteers virtually. Training was provided by Nebraska CASA Association's Training Director providing local CASA staff the knowledge and skills to transfer the curriculum and hands-on exercises to a virtual format.

As programs have begun to do more in-person this spring and summer, the technological capabilities and newly acquired skills have benefitted programs. Training can now be offered virtually and in-person allowing programs with large geographic areas to take advantage of less travel for staff and volunteers. For all local CASA programs, the ability to provide continuing education and take advantage of our partner's continuing education classes has led to more volunteer continuing education hours than ever before.

A statewide committee of CASA staff and board members has initiated more statewide volunteer recruitment and retention activities. This included the nomination and selection of a statewide CASA Champion who has promoted CASA volunteerism through social media and paid television advertising and in-person speaking engagements. It included coordination of social media recruitment campaign utilizing Foster Care and Reunification months and Blue Sunday. One local program piloted a partnership with the local community college to teach a class on volunteering with the goal of recruiting new CASA Volunteers.

CASA for Douglas County and Sarpy County CASA programs have experienced specific challenges related to the Department of Health and Human Service's private contract to serve children in those juvenile courts. Due to the transition of services and the lack of caseworkers, communication on children's cases has decreased. This has not only resulted in services not being provided to families, but CASA programs being asked to provide services in addition to advocacy for children. Examples are transportation, needed supplies for children, communication to services providers, and even temporary housing.

CASA volunteers creatively found ways to keep in contact with the children served while preventing the spread of COVID-19. Volunteers utilized online video calling, phone calls, visits outside, recorded videos, porch dropping off needed items and other methods of contact. Every local CASA program provided masks, gloves, hand sanitizer, and sanitizing wipes for volunteers and staff to utilize.

A) FINANCIAL REPORTS: A narrative report detailing the expenditures of your CASA Fund Recruitment and Retention and (if applicable) New or Expansion Grant

1. Program, award amount and target program area

Program Name	Recruitment and Training	New & Expanding	Innovative	Total
CASA Connection	\$13,401.00			\$13,401.00
CASA for Douglas County	\$60,912.00			\$60,912.00
CASA for Lancaster County	\$37,765.00			\$37,765.00
CASA for York County	\$9,746.00			\$9,746.00
CASA of Northeast Nebraska	\$10,941.00			\$10,941.00
CASA of Scotts Bluff County	\$15,533.00			\$15,533.00
CASA of South Central Nebraska	\$17,664.00			\$17,664.00
CASA of the Midlands	\$10,964.00	\$15,344.00		\$26,308.00
Cass County CASA	\$13,096.00			\$13,096.00
Dawson/Gosper County CASA	\$17,996.00			\$17,996.00
Fillmore County CASA	\$7,614.00			\$7,614.00
Heartland CASA	\$12,468.48			\$12,468.48
CASA of NorthCentral (Holt County)	\$0.00	\$15,334.00		\$15,334.00
Kearney/Buffalo County CASA	\$24,060.00			\$24,060.00
Lincoln County CASA	\$12,497.00			\$12,497.00
Phelps/Harlan County CASA	\$13,096.00			\$13,096.00
PlainsWest CASA	\$9,785.00	\$15,334.00		\$25,119.00
Prairie Plains CASA	\$12,089.00			\$12,089.00
Sarpy County CASA	\$42,942.00			\$42,942.00
SENCA CASA	\$10,800.00			\$10,800.00
Southeast Nebraska CASA	\$14,619.00			\$14,619.00
Trails West CASA	\$10,964.00			\$10,964.00
Training		\$3,988.00	\$10,663.84	\$14,651.84
Software for Statewide Training			\$1,419.06	\$1,419.06
Software for statewide database			\$15,599.00	\$15,599.00
New Statewide Recruitment Strategy			\$22,012.86	\$22,012.86
Background checks for local programs	\$218.00			\$218.00
Administration for Nebraska CASA Association	\$20,829.52		\$305.24	\$21,134.76
TOTAL	\$400,000.00	\$50,000.00	\$50,000.00	\$500,000.00

The August 29, 2020 Nebraska CASA Conference was held virtually. Software used for the conference allowed the 290 registrants to network online and view the conference sessions for 6 months following the conference. The conference included a motivational speaker who focused on working with children during the pandemic, educational sessions on diversity and inclusion, poverty, addiction and recovery, treatment for addiction, the perspective of youth in care, bullying, trauma related behaviors in children, oversight for children in foster care, and a panel with a juvenile court judge, guardian ad litem (GAL), and Nebraska Child and Family Services supervisor.

2. STORIES: Stories of a volunteer affecting the life of a child served by CASA. (All names have been changed to protect confidentiality.)

Robert, age 9, struggled with mental illness and challenging behaviors his entire life due to early childhood trauma. Robert was treated in a variety of facilities until his mother failed to provide a safe and stable environment. Her own mental health deteriorated to the extent that she feared she would harm Robert if left in her care. Robert's mother said she didn't want to parent him and relinquished her rights. Robert's behaviors escalated and he spent 5 months at Boys Town's Residential Treatment Center in addition to 7 other placements. Robert's father's rights were eventually terminated by the court. He was incarcerated and Robert did not know him. Robert saw some success at school but due to his behaviors, he was falling further behind. Robert's CASA volunteer, Keith, spent time talking with Robert, playing catch outside or just taking a walk. Keith became Robert's educational surrogate learning about his special education issues. After a placement in rural Lancaster County failed, Robert was placed with a family in western Nebraska. This placement coincided with the start of the COVID pandemic. Keith stayed in touch with Robert using FaceTime and Zoom sessions and phone calls. Robert's new foster family had a great deal of experience working with children with high behavioral needs and were doing well providing Robert with the structure he needed. Obtaining a trauma informed therapist in western Nebraska was challenging but eventually a therapist in Scottsbluff was located.

Robert coped with on-line school and had even more success this past school year. He was adopted in June of 2021 after living with his foster/adoptive family for a little over a year. Keith transitioned educational rights to the foster parents and remained in touch with the family through monthly Zoom team meetings. Keith was able to visit Robert earlier in 2021 in person and felt reassured that Robert had found his forever family. Keith worked well with the case worker and GAL and kept track of many details so that tasks were completed. He was definitely an asset to the team and continues to have periodic contact with Robert and his new family.

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On April of 2020 Cassie was made a state ward and appointed a CASA Volunteer. One of Cassie's brothers became a state ward that month and was appointed the same CASA Volunteer. Their youngest brother was then made a state ward in August of 2020 and appointed the same CASA Volunteer as his siblings. Both boys were placed in the same foster home located 190 miles away from their sister. The CASA volunteer made contact monthly in person or via Zoom. The CASA Volunteer advocated for the siblings to start in home visits with each other, and even attended their first sibling visit 190 miles away. All three of these children now have a guardianship hearing coming up in July of 2021 and have achieved permanency.

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A volunteer trained during the pandemic, Michelle, was a former ward of the state and was a CASA child in Nebraska. Based on her personal experience, Michelle wanted to make a difference by becoming a volunteer. She was trained, screened, sworn in, and assigned three children.

Nebraska Child and Family Services (CFS) wanted to dismiss the case because the biological mom recently completed drug treatment. Michelle passionately disagreed with them, stating that it was too soon to dismiss. Michelle passionately related that this is how children get lost in the system and end up with too many placements, as she did. Michelle had 22 placements as a child in the system. She lobbied hard with the court appointed GAL. There was an emergency hearing set in front of the judge, and thanks to the hard work and dedication of this volunteer, the case was not closed. The biological mom relapsed within 45 days and has not been seen since May of 2021. The kids continue to stay with a foster family that is dedicated to them and has expressed a desire to adopt.

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Benson's mother and stepfather abandoned him in Oklahoma, leaving him with his grandfather. He was being sexually abused by his stepfather. Benson's biological father is unknown. Benson's grandfather brought him to Nebraska and left him with his aunt. His grandfather then moved, changed his address, and disconnected his phone, abandoning Benson again. His aunt's boyfriend was physically abusive to Benson so, he ran away. Benson was 12 years old at the time.

By the age of 12 Benson had already had three psychiatric hospitalizations. Ken was appointed as his CASA Volunteer Advocate prior to the first hearing. Due to Benson's behaviors and history, it was recommended that he be placed in facility with a high level of care. The only suitable facility in Nebraska had a 6 month wait list.

CFS had already exhausted foster home placements in the state. Ken researched possible facilities that could take Benson immediately and found a facility that could meet his needs located in Wyoming. Benson's CFS worker refused to consider this placement because it would be too costly. Ken argued in court for the placement, presented all of his research on services to the Judge, and was able to get Benson placed at the facility in Wyoming.

There were a lot of ups and downs through the years. Ken worked on locating extended family members. Some committed to taking Benson but all eventually backed out of providing a home for him. Benson has been able to move from the facility and is currently in a foster home. He is 16 years old. Through all of Benson's challenges, with Ken's help, he has begun to advocate for himself. Benson now has the confidence and knows that speaking for himself gets him the best results instead of the acting out. He is happy where he is and is working on catching up in school.

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Children were removed from their parents in September of 2018 due to neglect, parental drug use, and physical abuse. They were placed into foster care with their biological brother and his wife. Unfortunately, the biological parents would disappear then re-appear causing more trauma for their children.

Emma was appointed as a CASA Volunteer in November of 2018. Emma met with the children at least monthly, and often more frequently. She attended monthly team meetings and provided

reports to the court. Emma took the children on outings and to her kickboxing business so the children could just "vent" to her. Emma worked with services to get the children school clothes. She was in constant contact with the foster mother ensuring the children were doing well and addressing any unmet needs. Emma worked with other community partners to find resources for the children's self-confidence.

The biological parents relinquished their rights in May of 2020. Often children of teenage years are provided a guardianship. However, in this instance, with the help of the CASA volunteer and CFS, the children were adopted by their foster parents in January of 2021.

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