

CASA Fund Year-End Report July 31, 2022

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 53 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, 2021 to June 30, 2022.

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 increased the 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. Programs have adapted in this fiscal year to meet the needs in their counties. Virtual and in-person training are used. There were 206 new volunteers who were screened, trained, and sworn in as CASA advocates during the fiscal year. This is only 50 fewer than the last fiscal year.

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 128% growth in volunteers serving children since the CASA Fund began. The pandemic resulting in the only 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 FY 2016/17
- 820 volunteers for FY 2017/18
- 886 volunteers for FY 2018/19
- 957 volunteers for FY 2019/20
- 938 volunteers for FY 2020/21
- 960 volunteers for FY 2021/22

In this fiscal year, 161 volunteers left the program. This is 56% increase from last fiscal year. Unfortunately, the increase in numbers of people quitting paid positions seems to be a pattern we are also experiencing with volunteers. Part of that reason is people who did not move out of state or make major life changes during the pandemic are doing so at this time and unable to continue their CASA volunteer positions. CASA's statewide focus on volunteer retention continues with extensive training including 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. A three year project assessment resulted in the findings that emotional exhaustion of CASA staff decreased while personal achievement increased.

New and Expanding Programs

CASA Connection – This program began serving Platte County in 1992, then Colfax County in 2000. This year Nance County was added to their service area. The program worked locally to gain the support of other partners in the child welfare system and larger community, then completed requirements of the National CASA/GAL Association for Children.

PlainsWest CASA - This program, formerly Cheyenne County CASA, expanded to serve Morrill and Deuel Counties. The program has continued their goal of serving every child in care this year.

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- For two years, Nebraska CASA has 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. However, the program has experienced the challenges of finding qualified and committed staff and just hired the third director for the program.

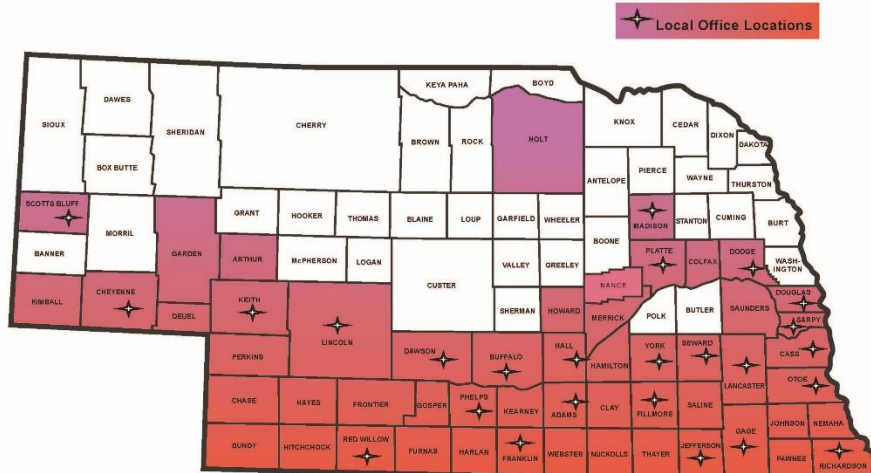
CASA of the Midlands- This program was formerly the CASA Project of Dodge County housed within the County Attorney’s office. The program only served 3 to 5 children per year. Now their own 501c3 agency with a director and volunteer coordinator, the program has formed a board of directors. The program is increasing the number of volunteers to serve children in Dodge County and has now expanded into Saunders County. This year they served 50 children with 24 active volunteers.

CASA served 54 courts during the year. This is an increase of 17 counties since the CASA Fund began. Local CASA programs served the county courts in the following counties:

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

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

Nebraska CASA Programs



2,011 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.

A brief overview of some successes during fiscal year 2021-2022

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.

- 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	\$9,093.00			\$9,093.00
CASA for Douglas County	\$68,000.00			\$68,000.00
CASA for Lancaster County	\$40,765.00			\$40,765.00
CASA for York County	\$20,500.00			\$20,500.00
CASA of Northeast Nebraska	\$15,000.00			\$15,000.00
CASA of Scotts Bluff County	\$15,533.00			\$15,533.00
CASA of South Central Nebraska (includes Fillmore County)	\$30,278.00			\$30,278.00
CASA of the Midlands	\$14,746.00	\$12,044.00		\$26,790.00
Cass County CASA	\$13,096.00			\$13,096.00
Dawson/Gosper County CASA	\$17,996.00			\$17,996.00
Heartland CASA	\$15,003.00			\$15,003.00
CASA of NorthCentral (Holt County)	\$0.00	\$22,044.00		\$22,044.00
Kearney/Buffalo County CASA	\$23,340.00			\$23,340.00
Lincoln County CASA	\$12,497.00			\$12,497.00
Phelps/Harlan County CASA	\$13,096.00			\$13,096.00
PlainsWest CASA	\$17,785.00	\$12,044.00		\$29,829.00
Prairie Plains CASA	\$9,134.00			\$9,134.00
Sarpy County CASA	\$17,000.00			\$17,000.00
SENCA CASA	\$15,800.00	\$3,867.00		\$19,667.00
Southeast Nebraska CASA	\$32,778.00			\$32,778.00

Trails West CASA	\$12,000.00			\$12,000.00
Training			\$12,999.74	\$12,999.74
Software			\$20,759.00	\$20,759.00
Volunteer Background checks	\$105.00			\$105.00
Volunteer Recruitment			\$2,697.26	\$2,697.26
TOTAL	\$413,545.00	\$49,999.00	\$36,456.00	\$500,000.00

Initial Recruitment and Training and New and Expanding grants were provided to all local CASA programs in the first quarter of the grant. Additional grant funding was provided to . local rural CASA programs as another funding source was cut from these programs in the last quarter of the fiscal year. This funding cut would have led to potential layoffs of local staff that provide recruitment, training and support of CASA volunteers. An additional \$46,000 was provided out of this funding and another \$46,000 from Nebraska CASA Association reserve funds were provided to the following programs:

	TOTAL	CASA Fund	NE CASA Reserve
Grant to Local CASA Program			
CASA for York County	\$12,000	\$0.0	0
CASA of Northeast Nebraska	\$20,000	\$0.0	\$8000
CASA of Scotts Bluff County	\$16,000	\$0.0	\$2000
CASA of South Central Nebraska	\$15,000	\$5,000.0	
CASA of the Midlands	\$10,000	\$5,000.0	
Gage County CASA	\$25,000	\$10,000.0	
PlainsWest CASA	\$20,000	\$8,000.0	
Heartland CASA	\$15,000	\$0.0	\$6000
Kearney/Buffalo County CASA	\$15,000	\$0.0	\$6000
Trails West CASA	\$15,000	\$0.0	\$6000
Lincoln County CASA	\$15,000	\$0.0	\$6000

SENCA CASA	\$9,000	\$5,000.0	
Phelps/Harlan County CASA	\$15,000	\$0.0	\$6000
Southeast Nebraska CASA	\$15,000	\$3,000.0	\$6000
CASA of NorthCentral	\$25,000	\$10,000.0	

Funds were used for Casa Manager software that is used by local CASA programs as our database for child and volunteer data. Total annual cost of licenses was \$16,100. The cost for Casa Connect that pulls data for the state association to run reports for local or statewide programs was \$899.

Training was provided by the Nebraska CASA Association Training Director for all new local CASA staff to attend a Training of Facilitators. This training is required in order for CASA staff to conduct the required 30 hour training of new CASA Volunteers. \$10,000 in salary for the Nebraska CASA Training Director was charged to this grant.

Other training costs include the Nebraska CASA Conference and a western Nebraska Regional day long CASA Conference.

An expenditure of \$105.00 for volunteer criminal, adult and child abuse background checks.

Volunteer recruitment marketing costs of \$3,290 for central Nebraska recruitment of volunteers.

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

A 14 year old youth who was made a state ward and was labeled as “unadoptable” due to his lengthy history of non-compliant behaviors and the history of abuse and neglect he had endured at the hands of his father. He was removed from his father and hadn’t seen his mother since he was 3 weeks old. He had been in a guardianship with his Aunt, but it was dissolved when she could not safely meet his needs.

In November 2020, he was assigned a CASA couple, who were committed to him from day one. They followed him from placement to placement, sometimes involving travel 50 – 100 miles away to include PRTF care, group home care, hospitalizations, and foster care.

The CASAs were important in helping him locate extended biological family members so he could at least have some family connections in his life. And the CASA’s have supported him in his recent contacts with his biological mother. In June 2021, a foster family was identified to take placement of him. We are now awaiting his upcoming adoption in August 2022. He is attending regular high school, is holding down a part-time job, continues to heal in therapy, is getting his driver’s permit, and is working with an Independent Living Specialist.

For almost 2 years, the CASA's have been instrumental in supporting this youth and making sure his best interests were at the forefront of his case.

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CASA volunteers were assigned to a frustrated youth. He frequently fought, had verbal outbursts, was failing academically, and numerous runs-in with school administration and the law. This youth eventually lost his zest for caring and believed that his life had no value because no one really cared for him. With the relentless support of his CASA volunteer, probation officer, and the rest of his legal support team, he found renewed hope and quickly began to turn his life around. He made the school honor roll, fulfilled his probation requirements, and completed summer school which made up the credits needed for him to graduate on time. He now has a part-time job and is getting preparing to receive permanency through guardianship with his current foster home.

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Amy is 9 years old and a state ward for the third time in her young life. She likes the color purple and sparkly things. Her father's mental illness has kept him from being able to provide a safe and stable home or to consistently parent Amy. While she was able to be returned to her father's care the first two times she was in the system, this time is different. Her father's untreated mental illness is more severe, and Amy's trauma has been compounded by being homeless and living for a time with her father under a bridge. At this point in her case, Amy is placed in an adoptive foster home. She was in this home before, so she is well acquainted with her foster mother. Her father's parental rights have been terminated by the court, but he has filed an appeal, so the case is pending. Amy's behaviors, especially at school escalated. But with the help of her CASA volunteer Cathy, she attended school and the Extended Day program at HopeSpoke. Visits with her father no longer take place and Amy's behaviors have improved. She is very curious about her maternal mother's Native American family (biomom relinquished her rights during the first case). CASA volunteer Cathy has worked hard to identify family members and half-siblings and has given Amy information about her Native American heritage as well as taking her to events like Pow Wows. CASA volunteers get to know the children they are assigned to and work to advocate for their best interests. It is in Amy's best interest to know about her entire family and to connect with her culture. Cathy will continue to advocate for those cultural ties as well as the best educational and mental health programs Amy needs. With Cathy's help, Amy will exit the child welfare system soon – and won't re-enter it a fourth time.

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Michael received an order from the court to advocate for a 7-year-old boy. The child had experienced neglect, physical abuse, and watched his mother endure months of domestic violence. This child even experienced his mother telling him she was leaving

and he “could just see how he would do without no one to care for him.” Both his parents suffered from mental illness with his mother often leaving and disappearing for days on end.

Although Michael lives in another county, he traveled to visit his CASA kid. Through patience and persistence, the young boy opened up to Michael. The child looked forward to Michael’s visits making sure that he knew about any school events, baseball games or flag football. Michael made attended as many of these as he could, often driving 45 to 50 miles just to watch a 30-minute football game. Michael also learned the child’s likes and dislikes. He found the young child liked chocolate shakes from Runza and with the foster parents blessing, he would frequently take him a shake a visit or a game.

Michael attended team meetings, all court hearings, anything to do with the case that he possibly could. When the child struggled with therapy Michael recommended a trauma therapist. Michael researched trauma therapists and helped locate a therapist within a reasonable distance that helped the child dramatically.

The case eventually came to termination of parental rights (TPR). Lee was subpoenaed to testify. Several attorneys commented that Michael provided better testimony than the caseworkers. Judge ruled for TPR but then the case went to appeal. Fortunately, the Appeals Court held up the Judge’s ruling. After 1019 days in the Juvenile Court System, four different DHHS workers, and 1 CASA volunteer, this young boy was adopted.

On adoption day all parties involved in the case were able to witness this young boy finally get his permanent, safe and loving foster home.