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## CASA looking for volunteers to help protect children

*Kurt Madar The Daily Times*

FARMINGTON — A group of volunteers is making sure abused children don't get lost in the system, and they have their hands full. They are called CASA volunteers, and they protect children without getting paid. They advocate for children who have been abused, seeking to protect those children from both the abuser and the overworked judicial system.

CASA, Court Appointed Special Advocates, began in Seattle in 1977, and ever since has spread its system of volunteers across the nation.

In Farmington, CASA volunteers are part of **Childhaven's** effort to lift "children from crisis to hope."

The best part is that the CASA volunteer program isn't just working, it's making a difference, according to local judges who deal with child abuse cases far too often.

"The program makes positive outcomes possible," said District Court Judge Sandra Price, who adjudicates many Farmington child abuse cases. "I see a fundamental difference in the cases that have a CASA volunteer involved, they make a huge impact."

The work isn't easy, and more volunteers are always needed.

CASA volunteers not only deal with the abused child's family, they also interface with judges, social workers, attorneys and therapists. In the case of school-age children, CASA volunteers also spend time working with teachers and school-based counselors.

"I've been a CASA volunteer for about three years," said Farmington volunteer Billie Curnutt. "I was looking for something to give back, and this has been the most rewarding experience of my life."

It's also very difficult, Curnutt said

"It's sad, very sad," she said. "Your mindset is making sure these kids are doing OK, but it's hard to block out what happened to them."

It only took one case for Curnutt to get hooked.

"My first case I had a mother with two children; the mother and the youngest were being abused," she said. "When she got her parental rights back, she hugged me. I feel that I gave her the strength, and when she got custody back, the abuser didn't."

Forty-five CASA volunteers are monitoring 105 children, volunteer coordinator Jeannie Wright said,

and it's not enough.

"I have 30 that I supervise," she said. "We can never have enough, though."

Program Director Amy O'Neill agrees that the work is both rewarding and emotionally challenging.

"This is one of the most challenging volunteer positions that I know of," O'Neill said. "It is rewarding. There are days when we feel down and good things happen. But more importantly, when you see success, when you see a child reach a safe and permanent home, those moments stick with you forever."

Curnutt agrees.

"When you give these children a chance, it's really amazing how they expand," she said. "I think I will keep involved as long as I can. But it's emotionally draining and sometimes you have to pull away because it is such a difficult task."

Judge Price agrees the task is difficult, saying she can't help being impressed with how the local effort is progressing.

"These people do a fantastic job," Price said. "They have built the program to be one of the largest and most successful in the state. It really is a jewel."

"I have seen amazing things," she said. "These people make a huge impact. I have seen CASA volunteers part of the family for years after their commitment is over. I have seen CASA volunteers become foster parents themselves to save these kids."

For more information on the CASA program and how to volunteer, contact Jeannie Wright at (505) 592-0167.

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