



## Healthier lives begin with volunteering

**Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of Franklin County seeks more community members to help abused and neglected kids.**

By Shelley Backs

How do you feel after you volunteer/ empowered? Accomplished? Satisfied? The effects that volunteering has on an individual's life are significant and range from lower stress levels to a greater sense of purpose. But how about

when you volunteer to help an abused and neglected child in need of guidance, trust, and support?

Every day in Franklin County, a child is left broken and with a great sense of fear and sadness because they have been hurt by the ones they love. In 2016, over 2,700 children found themselves in situations due to no fault of their own. They are physically, emotionally, and sexually abused and neglected. Child abuse and neglect is an epidemic, and luckily our community has an organization to help using volunteer efforts.

CASA of Franklin County is a non-profit organization with a mission to provide a powerful and consistent voice in court for child victims of abuse and neglect. CASA recruits and trains community members to become volunteer Guardians ad Litem (GAL) for these child victims. A Guardian ad Litem is a trained and committed volunteer who is a sworn officer of the court and who advocates for the best interests of children. They give a child a voice by monitoring the case and guaranteeing the child's wishes are a priority in an overburdened legal and child welfare system.

"The stories you hear on the news are often times CASA cases," said Kathy Kerr, Executive Director of CASA. "We can't, unfortunately, take all of the cases so we take the most severe. It is imperative that a child has a voice and we provide that and the consistency that is imperative for a child's success." Last year, CASA served 826 abused and neglected children thanks to its 243 volunteer GALs.

CASA is always in need of passionate volunteers to give a voice to those most vulnerable as they work their way through a large and frightening system. "Our GALs focus only on the child's best interests," said Beverly Robinson, Director of Volunteer Management. "Volunteers come from all walks of life—they do not need to be lawyers or social workers. Our children most often come from diverse backgrounds and are equally male and female, so having a diverse population of volunteers who can genuinely empathize with these children is invaluable."



Diversity within CASA's volunteer corps is pivotal to the organization's program as it allows for better representation of the children it serves. "You never know the adult that a child is going to trust and listen to," Robinson said. "We want to ensure that we are armed with the strongest backgrounds of volunteers so that the children never feel a lack in their sense of security."

CASA's volunteer role is extra special as it leaves the volunteer with a sense of hope and determination -the hope that they will change a child's life for the better and the determination to ensure that the safety and security of a child is realized. When a volunteer becomes a CASA GAL, they give selflessly of themselves. Yet when you ask a CASA GAL about their experience, most answer by saying something like this:

*"To impact a child's life is to impact our future."  
"When I can give one child hope, I've changed their world."  
"No other volunteer opportunity lets me make this kind of impact."  
"I couldn't sit by when I knew I could help."*

CASA trains its volunteers and provides them with the requisite knowledge and skills needed. This includes training in the legal system, case/project management, interviewing and analysis, cultural awareness, investigation, effective communication, child and family development, conflict management, and mental health and substance abuse awareness.

Once assigned to a case, a GAL visits the children at least monthly, often in a foster home, and talks with teachers, doctors, and others close to the child. A GAL then reports their findings to CASA and serves firsthand voice in court to answer questions and make fact-based recommendations regarding the children's best interests. "Many of these children have suffered from horrific abuse and neglect," Robinson said. "Obviously, learning to trust adults is an issue, and having an older, nurturing adult on their side is critical to their sense of well-being until their nightmare is over." A CASA volunteer is often the only consistent, caring adult involved from the beginning of a case to the end.

Research shows that children who experience the positive CASA GAL relationship are more likely to succeed in school and less likely to get into trouble, abuse illegal substances, or commit child abuse or family violence as adults. "We give them hope, encouragement, and a chance to grow up all while enriching the lives of our volunteers," Robinson said.

An average of five to eight hours a month will change the life of a neglected and abused child and will certainly enrich yours. **To learn more, please visit [www.casacolumbus.org](http://www.casacolumbus.org) or contact Beverly Robinson at 614-525-4883. Our next training class begins on May 8, 2017. Male and female volunteers are needed. A child is waiting.**



**Beverly Robinson**

## Do you want to enrich your life & help a child?

Will you help an innocent child victim of abuse and neglect?  
5-8 hours a month will give these children a **chance** in life.



**Join us** for our next training class beginning May 8, 2017!

<http://www.casacolumbus.org/volunteer/>



\*Learn more\* [www.casacolumbus.org](http://www.casacolumbus.org)\* 614-525-7450\*