

Fostering Change

*A Critical Eye on Foster Care
in Massachusetts*

From Executive Director Jane Lyons

Volunteer Advocacy - One Child at a Time



Helping children drawn into the complex child welfare system to not merely survive but *to thrive* requires the dedicated efforts of

significant adult advocates. In honor of three decades serving more than 2,000 vulnerable children through our successful Franklin/Hampshire CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) Program, we're dedicating this issue of *Fostering Change* to CASA. You'll learn more about the program itself and its positive impact on young people, on families, and on the volunteers who serve them.

To quote Marian Wright Edelman, Founder of The Children's Defense Fund, "CASA volunteers play a unique role on behalf of some of our most vulnerable children. Their commitment, vigilance and persistence offer hope where there has been little."

To our current and past CASA volunteers, we extend our heartfelt thanks. Friends of Children is proud to enter its fourth decade of service through CASA. Read on!

Jane Lyons



Celebrating 30 Years of CASA at Friends of Children

What is CASA? The Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) Program, a national grassroots movement, provides investigation into the long-term well-being needs of children and youth involved in the Juvenile Court due to family related problems. This sensitive advocacy work is provided by trained community volunteers from diverse professional and personal backgrounds. CASA receives an appointment from a judge, at which point general case information is gathered and potential volunteer assignments are considered. Once assigned, volunteers, known as CASAs, work in conjunction with school systems, the Department of Children and Families (DCF), health professionals (including primary care physicians, specialists, mental health service providers, etc), and direct care providers (including parents, foster families, and residential facility staff). Friends of Children CASA staff and volunteers collaborate to gather information on the child's well-being and report back to the local court system. They identify needs of the child that are not currently being met and recommend actions that can be taken to address these gaps in care. Additionally, CASA advocates for permanency to be achieved in reasonable time frames through either reunification with parents if possible or alternative placements through adoption or guardianship.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Celebrating 30 Years of CASA / FROM PAGE 1

30 Years of Service

Friends of Children (FOC) has run the Franklin Hampshire CASA program, which fits well with the overall advocacy mission of our organization, since 1993. Franklin/Hampshire CASA, one of 7 programs in Massachusetts, is a member of the National CASA Association which represents more than 950 CASA programs nationwide. Our program currently serves more than 80 children and youth annually within Franklin and Hampshire counties at an annual cost of \$1,963 per child.

Keeping Siblings Connected: One Recent CASA Case

Identifying information has been altered to protect client confidentiality. The circumstances outlined in this case are true.

At the start of 2022, siblings John and Robert came into the custody of the Department of Children and Families (DCF) following a mental health crisis within their immediate family. Since then, there have been significant struggles providing the children with stable foster placements. As a result of this placement instability, it has been difficult for each child to receive the array of services they need.

John, 15, had been in need of ongoing therapy, which was inaccessible due to lack of transportation. When neither DCF nor the foster parent were able to commit to transporting John, the CASA volunteered to drive John from school to his weekly sessions. John has shared with his CASA how much these weekly sessions have positively impacted his life and how the time that he and his CASA spend together has helped him to feel understood and connected.

Robert, 3, has struggled with a significant speech delay which negatively affects his social and emotional development—and changes in foster placements have prevented him from receiving much-needed speech-therapy services. While this issue has yet to be resolved, CASA has researched and presented numerous options to DCF, the local school district, and the current foster parents to ensure that a resolution will be reached as quickly as possible.

Because of their significant age difference, the brothers have been in separate foster placements since entering DCF custody. Over the last year, this has caused immense stress for both boys, as they were not able to visit each other consistently or have regular communication until

the end of 2022. With the support and advocacy of the CASA, the new foster parents are now able to provide the siblings with open access to visitation, including an overnight visit that occurred over the winter holidays.

“It’s been a privilege to build trusting relationships with each of my CASA kids, as well as their caregivers, and providers. I’ve felt empowered to not just make sure they are getting their most basic needs met, but to advocate for access to services and opportunities that too often are viewed as “extras” in the child welfare system like the music, speech, and language programs that can help them thrive.”

— CASA Volunteer



Support Extracurriculars for Foster Children Through Kathie’s Fund

Created in 2021 in memory of powerhouse CASA volunteer Kathie Stewart, *Kathie’s Fund* covers expenses for the extracurricular activities that make life full and normal for foster children. The more than \$2,300 raised since this fund’s creation have provided our children and teens with the opportunity to go to volleyball camps, to ski, and to join a gym, among many other meaningful activities—supporting our CASA children socially, physically, and emotionally.

Too often foster families lack the financial resources to give young people the extracurricular activities that would help them heal and grow. As extracurriculars begin to rev up again and camps send out registration forms, *Kathie’s Fund* strongly needs your support to continue to serve our kids.

Visit friendsofchildreninc.org/kathies-fund to make a donation and learn more about Kathie Stewart’s’ legacy.

Sharing Victories: A New CASA Volunteer's Perspective*

What drew you to the CASA program?

I adopted my son through the Massachusetts Foster to Adoption Program. He was three days old when he came to live with me, and with the support of an amazing adoption team at DCF, I was able to formally adopt Ben at 11 months. Working with DCF case workers, seeing their commitment, and hearing their stories made me want to stay involved in the child welfare arena. I considered fostering but ultimately decided that I could have a broader impact through the CASA program. I have the privilege of being an advocate for my son and want to enable and empower struggling families with the same tools for advocacy for their own children.

How did you feel going through the process of onboarding (interview, training, etc.) and receiving a case assignment?

Initially, I was surprised by the amount of information and training that was involved, which included lots of processes and rules. Would I do everything the right way? Would I say something wrong? Am I emotionally equipped to handle these potentially traumatic environments? But ultimately, the intensive training gave me confidence and empowered me to ask the right questions and to really dig into my first case because I had the tools to do so effectively.

Debi (Belkin) and Sarah (Segura) were instrumental in guiding me through my first court report and were always available when I needed guidance. During

my first case, most of my early conversations with Sarah were gut checks. Am I approaching this the right way? What do you think about this? It was extremely helpful to get the reassurance that my thought process was right and that my instincts were supported.

What has it been like to work and connect with the child and adults that you are involved with?

I was initially concerned about the time commitment. How would this obligation fit into an already busy schedule? The reality is that I quickly invested in the family that I was supporting, and it was easy to carve out time because I genuinely wanted to check in with the child and the child's support team. Her victories became my victories. Helping a family through a tough transition and ensuring that support systems are in place and working effectively is extremely rewarding.

What qualities or strengths have you found to be the most valuable in doing this work?

Patience. Perseverance. Trust. There's an element of trusting the system and trusting that everyone involved with the case has the child's best interests at heart. I tried to approach each conversation from a place of positivity and compassion; to see all sides. I was lucky enough to join a case with a mother who recommitted to providing a better environment for her kids. She was invested in doing the work. It wasn't always smooth sailing but knowing that we were all coming from the same place made it easier for the entire team (CASA, DCF, mom, child, school, etc.) to fully support the child and to make decisions that were in her best interest. Mom is doing really well and recently called me to tell me about a great call that she had with her daughter's school. She was so proud of her, and she wanted to share that with me. It was an amazing feeling.

"Her victories became my victories. Helping a family through a tough transition and ensuring that support systems are in place and working effectively is extremely rewarding."

— New CASA Volunteer

*For privacy, we do not name our volunteers.

Special Education CASA Alison Greene: An Extra-Special Resource and Advocate



With a Master’s degree, specialized CASA training as a special education advocate, and rich professional practical experience throughout Massachusetts, Alison Greene was first motivated to become a CASA after her own journey garnering support for her child with special needs.

In 2018, Debi Belkin, FOC’s Director of Programs, invited Greene to provide more intensive training for CASA volunteers who advocate for foster children with special needs. Thrilled to find the CASAs at Friends of Children to be knowledgeable, dedicated volunteers, Greene frequently shares her special education expertise. A typical concern might involve helping a fellow CASA convince a school district to perform educational screening tests for a foster child.

Greene also serves as a lead advocate for cases involving foster children whose special needs require more substantial research. When the court assigns her to such cases, she gathers information from the child, the family,

the schools, the Department of Children and Families, and mental health workers to ensure that procedures have been followed correctly. Given the strain that the pandemic has placed on the ability of schools to help families with these procedures, Greene’s service has only become more critical.

For the many CASAs serving foster children with special needs, encouraging schools and foster families to collaborate on an effective, individualized plan of action for a child can pose significant challenges. Understanding the unique strengths, history, and needs of each child requires time and trust. But the rewards of such effort are realized when children discover hope for the future as they receive the support they need. As Greene says, “One of my takeaways is that you have to have a very good picture of a child’s profile before you can meet their needs.”

“One of my takeaways is that you have to have a very good picture of a child’s profile before you can meet their needs.”

— Alison Greene



241 King Street, Northampton, MA 01060
(413) 586-0011 • friendsofchildreninc.org

Founded in Massachusetts in 1990, Friends of Children, Inc., is an independent 501 (c) 3 non-profit leader in child-welfare-related issues. We help vulnerable children and youth who have experienced foster care overcome adversity and thrive—with innovative direct-service programs and through state-level advocacy. We champion critical changes needed for at-risk children and youth—and for the systems entrusted with their well-being.



Board of Directors

2022-2023

PRESIDENT

Susan Karas

*Immediate Past Board President
Retired Child and Adolescent Director, ServiceNet*

VICE PRESIDENT

JoAnne Vanin

Retired Dean of Students, UMASS Amherst, 15 year CASA volunteer

SECRETARY

Antonia Krell

*Special Education Tutor,
Former CASA volunteer*

TREASURER

Kelly Sykes

Greenfield Savings Bank

Krystyna Boisjolie

RFK Community Alliance

Robin Hanley

*Former Development Director,
BSO at Tanglewood*

Karen Zilberstein

*Clinical Psychologist,
Children and Families*

Staff

Jane Lyons

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

June Ameen

POLICY DIRECTOR

Robbie Rubet

FOCUS PROGRAM MANAGER

Sarah Segura

CASA CASE MANAGER

Debi Belkin

CASA DIRECTOR

Susan Swift

DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR

Valerie Smart

VOLUNTEER & COMMUNITY
OUTREACH COORDINATOR

Rosemary Koski

PROGRAM INTERN