

# Fostering Change

*A Critical Eye on Foster Care  
in Massachusetts*

*From Co-Executive Directors  
Debi Belkin & Sarah Segura*

## Fresh Leadership Times Two

Welcome to *Fostering Change*. As the first Co-Executive Directors of Friends of Children, we are thrilled to be taking the lead at this incredible organization. Having been with the agency for quite some time, we are both intensely committed to the organization's mission of helping young people have opportunities to lead fulfilling lives. We are excited to work together and to further the vital work that was initiated by Jane Lyons.

In moving to a synergistic Co-Executive Director Model, we knew that we were making a commitment to leading an organization with experienced staff who have worked hard to create programs and services that make a significant difference in the lives of those we touch. Moving forward, we expect to increase the capacity of all programs across the state; to strengthen our participation in like-minded coalitions; and to continue to strenuously advocate individually and systemically for the children, young adults, and families with whom we work.



## Debi Belkin and Sarah Segura Step Up to Co-Lead Friends of Children

Friends of Children, Inc. (FOC) is excited to announce new leadership at the organization effective February 1.

New Co-Executive Directors Debi Belkin, MSW, LICSW and Sarah Segura, MSW, LCSW are co-directing Friends of Children after years of serving FOC in other management roles.

"After a long search process and evaluation of the needs of Friends of Children, the Board is very excited to endorse this new leadership model. With the appointment of Debi and Sarah, we have the benefits of Debi's extensive knowledge and professional experience coupled with Sarah's new perspective, energy, and commitment to serving our children and families," said Jo-Anne Vanin, President of the Board of Friends of Children, Inc.

**This edition of *Fostering Change* highlights the perspectives of recent and long-serving Court Appointed Special Advocates, or CASA volunteers. These trained, talented and committed individuals are critical to the success of our CASA program.**



**CASA since 2003**

## Jo-Anne Vanin: Advocating for Youth, Leading the Board

*Jo-Anne Vanin, who became a CASA through Friends of Children in 2003, is a retired associate vice chancellor of Student Affairs/Dean of Students at the University of Massachusetts. Dr. Vanin currently also serves as the Board President of Friends of Children.*

### What drew you to become a CASA?

I had always been involved in community activities with my three children: as a parent rep in the schools; coaching youth basketball; helping with Girl Scouts, etc. With all three off to college, the CASA opportunity offered the chance to again be involved with kids. In addition, my daily professional work tasked me with advocating for the needs and rights of students. I had even previously considered fostering. So several interests and experiences came together to make CASA an intriguing opportunity.

### What is the work of a CASA?

First and foremost, a CASA serves as the independent advocate for the best interest of the child, whatever the attending circumstances. The key word is “independent.” CASA’s role is to determine and advocate for what is in the child’s best interest, “independent” of past decisions guided

**I am constantly encouraged and amazed by the resiliency of the children.**

– Jo-Anne Vanin

by DCF policy or recommendations from attorneys, school personnel, or other interested parties such as foster parent placement agencies. At the same time, CASA can serve as the “glue” that promotes better communication between these collateral agencies, as often CASA is the only on-going voice involved with a case. Over the period of time a child and family are involved with DCF, case workers and providers can and often do change several times. The CASA becomes the repository of comprehensive information as they will have been in contact with ALL collaterals.

### What have been the high points and challenges?

The high points are without question the closure of cases via reunification with strengthened families or adoptions/guardianships. Throughout these journeys, I am constantly encouraged and

amazed by the resiliency of the children. Despite neglect and sometimes horrific abuse, children can and do, with appropriate support, treatment, and belief in them, heal and thrive.

The challenges are the well documented systemic problems within the DCF: overworked social workers carrying too many cases to adequately monitor them; insufficient available foster placements; insufficient mental health services resulting in long delays in scheduling assessments and assigning therapists; an insufficient number of therapists willing to take these cases once a child is evaluated; a lack of school services for children with special needs; and the failure of the foster care review system to affect change and promote progress on cases. These and other challenges result in a process that is too encumbered to effect timely change resulting in families languishing in poor situations, children experiencing multiple or no placements; and wait lists for mental health services. It is the CASA who is often the catalyst or squeaky wheel that fosters progress. The critical activities of CASA work include making monthly

visits to directly observe a child’s circumstance, keeping in contact with social workers, and asking tough questions during foster care review meetings.

### How has CASA work changed over the years?

Two aspects of this work have evolved and required more intentional involvement. First, the CASA does need to directly monitor and address a child’s school situation. Knowledge about special education laws, service mandates, etc. is essential. Schools play a vital role in identifying problems and implementing services. Second, in my CASA work, I find the need to engage with the foster parents more than in the past. Foster parents are often not given a child’s full family history; are left in the dark regarding changes in the case; and do not fully understand how the DCF system works. Often a follow-up by the CASA on a foster parent inquiry is necessary to get results. ■



**CASA since 2023**

## Leah Webb-Halpern: I See Them, I Love Them, None of This Is Their Fault

*Leah became a court-appointed special advocate, or CASA, through Friends of Children in June 2023. She holds a Master’s degree, and has studied intergenerational and historical trauma. She spoke with Fostering Change to share her perspective as a new CASA.*

### What drew you to become a CASA?

I was drawn to working with children in the child welfare system after having my first child

while I was a graduate student in Madison, Wisconsin. While there, I began volunteering at a non-profit organization as a family interaction specialist supervising visitations. That organization also ran the local CASA program. I was impressed by the compassion staff and volunteers showed the families with whom they worked, and by their diligence in challenging their personal biases as well as biases within the child welfare sys-

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Leah Webb-Halpern / FROM PAGE 3

tem. Through my interactions with members of that CASA team, I could see that they really cared about the child-family unit and that they were very aware of the profound systemic and intergenerational challenges the families were up against. When my family moved to Massachusetts, I decided to eventually become a CASA volunteer.

#### What is the work of a CASA?

The purpose of the CASA program is to act as an unbiased set of eyes on what is going on in a child's life. We then report what we are seeing back to the court formally through report writing, or informally by answering questions in court proceedings. The turnover rate for other providers is really high, so CASAs are asked to make a longer commitment to the child as a way of providing continuity. We are the consistent voice that helps to move services along, especially educational services. We're also able to build a meaningful relationship with the kids and teens we work with, letting them know that we hear them and see what they're going through.

#### What have been the high points? The challenges?

I've had the benefit of working on two very different cases, so I've had a variety of experiences with the involved systems, and I've been able to wear a number of different hats in my advocacy work. I've been able to support the teens I work with to tell their stories, to give them a safe place to express their frustrations and sadness, and to validate how they're feeling. The systems that they're involved in can be difficult to work with, and these teens need to know that they aren't alone in feeling frustrated and disheartened by the experiences. At the end of the day, the personal impact of the volunteer is immeasurable to the child they're working with.

The most challenging thing is that for structural reasons, systems--DCF and school systems specifically--are so over-capacity that the workers don't always have the time to get to know the teens to see

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– Leah Webb-Halpern

what is really going on with them. Because of that disconnect, the children are sometimes blamed for what is going wrong in their lives. It seems that these systems require perfection from kids and families at every turn, while, at the same time, the children and families themselves are being failed. I have to remind myself that even in the face of systemic injustice, there is power in continuing to show up and view children and their families with unconditional positive regard. And, of course, I'm always looking to find the places where I can have a material effect.

#### Any closing thoughts?

I have been amazed at the impact of small gestures--getting someone a backpack and basic school supplies, picking up fast food, providing gift cards for toiletries, offering a listening ear. Showing up in what feels like small ways is how I've been able to prove to kids that I care and those gestures have been the catalyst to bonding and building trust. Sometimes the ask is so small that I have to be careful about setting boundaries on what I can do today, and what can realistically be taken care of another time. These kids long for meaningful connections, for people who see them as they are and continue to show up without judgment. If there is one message that I could share with all of these kids, it's that I see them, I love them, and that none of this is their fault. ■

## FOCUS You Belong

### FOCUS Gift Card Drive Welcomes Youth and Brightens Birthdays

The FOCUS program pairs competent, consistent, and compassionate mentors with 18-to-26-year-olds who have been impacted by the foster care system. Youth in FOCUS work with long-term mentors to hone the skills needed to navigate the complexities of the transition to adulthood. In FOCUS, each young adult is in the driver's seat. Participants have courageously taken the first step to acknowledge their need for support and to enter into a relationship, which is not always an easy thing for them to do.

When they join FOCUS, many of these young adults do not have anyone with whom to celebrate their birthdays, or even someone to wish them a "Happy birthday." We know that birthdays can be a time of high emotions, a painful reminder of loss. We want to remind young adults in FOCUS that we are there for them by helping to celebrate their milestones and achievements. We want to make sure that every youth in FOCUS feels welcomed as they begin their journey with us to realize their full potential. We do this by providing them with welcome packages and by acknowledging their birthdays.

With your support, FOCUS has been changing the status quo and welcoming youth with open arms and small gift packages. To continue to acknowledge these important events, we are seeking support through the purchase of gift cards or through dedicated donations to do so. VISA and Amazon cards in denominations of \$50 or \$25 are most accessible for our young people to use and are most appreciated. Every small gesture counts and means so much to the young adults with whom we work.

Our goal is to raise \$5,000 in 2024 for this gift-card drive. Achieving this goal will provide enough gift cards to welcome new young people into the program and to help celebrate the birthdays of all FOCUS participants.

Send your gift cards to:

**FOCUS Gift Card Drive  
Friends of Children  
241 King St, #227  
Northampton, MA 01060**

Or donate online toward  
the purchase of gift cards at  
[friendsofchildreninc.org/focus-gift-card](https://friendsofchildreninc.org/focus-gift-card)

*Thank you!*



# Supporting Foster Children Through the Katie Lyons Memorial Fund

On December 13th, 2023, Joe's Cafe in Northampton hosted a fundraiser for Friends of Children in memory of Katie Lyons, a beloved friend and employee at Joe's, and the daughter of Paul Lyons and former Friends of Children executive director Jane Lyons.

Friends and family joined Jane and Paul at Joe's Cafe, which donated 25% of all sales that evening to *Katie's Fund*. One hundred percent of the sales of wine donated by Michael Ferry from Martignetti Distributors and beer donated by O'Brian Tomalin of Building 8 Brewing (BLDG8) also went directly to *Katie's Fund*. Friends near and far that night and in the following weeks made donations to support this special event.

**To date, \$9,292 has been raised, a touching tribute to Katie.**

Established with the generous support of Meaghan Sullivan and Joe's Cafe, *Katie's Fund* honors Katie's memory by supporting children affected by foster care. All donations to *Katie's Fund* will provide essentials for children in the Foster Dignity Program at Friends of Children. Our sincere thanks to all who have contributed.



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“Taking on the role of Co-Executive Director feels like coming full circle with Friends of Children. As the first President of the Board of Directors, I witnessed firsthand the evolution of a child advocacy agency that was created to provide essential services to children, young adults, and families at a time when the state no longer wanted to invest in this critical area. In my time at the agency, I have seen FOC grow from a two-person operation to a staff of seven; from providing only child advocacy services to running CASA, creating and expanding FOCUS across the state, and becoming actively involved in policy work on behalf of children involved in the state's child welfare system. While it is a daunting task to fill the shoes of Jane Lyons, I am elated to be able to continue her work here at FOC.”

- Debi Belkin, MSW

“Days after beginning my role as Co-Executive Director, I stumbled upon a journal that I had written in about 13 years ago. In it, I described in detail my desire to work with an organization that brought communities together to support their most vulnerable members. Little did I know that 11 years later, I would find myself at Friends of Children where this work was already well under way. I step into this leadership role knowing that each member of this team, including staff, board members, and volunteers across all programs, is deeply committed to the long term well-being of the young people we serve. I feel privileged to be entrusted with this role, and I aim to honor the work that has been done by Jane Lyons and innumerable community members over the last thirty years.”

- Sarah Segura, MSW

We look forward to working with and on behalf of you, and we are so grateful for the support that sustains us. There is so much to do and there are so many children and young adults to reach. Working together, change is possible!

Debi Belkin, MSW

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Debi Belkin has more than 40 years of experience advocating for court-involved children and adolescents in Massachusetts including more than 30 years as a supervisor at the Department of Children and Families. She has most recently been the Director of Programs at FOC.

Sarah Segura has been with FOC since 2021, sharing her experience in advocacy, case management, and program development—as well as a passion for working with individuals and families of diverse cultural backgrounds. She has most recently been the CASA Program Manager at FOC.

Please join us in welcoming Debi and Sarah to their new roles. ■

*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.*

## Staff

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**“Children are our greatest treasure.  
They are our future.”**

**—Nelson Mandela**



**FRIENDS  
OF CHILDREN**

**TRUTH.  
ACTION.  
CHANGE.**

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