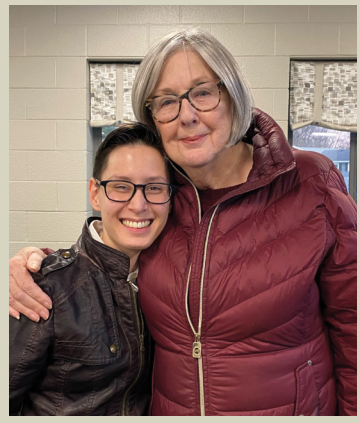


CASA CONNECT



ADVOCACY FOR LGBTQ+ YOUTH

Mary Finedore, a local medical student, LGBTQ+ educator, and friend of CASA, was on clinical rotation at a hospital when she saw something that changed her life: a young girl in the emergency room suffering immense trauma at the hands of her foster father. Accompanied by a caseworker, the child was shaking and in shock. Mary observed as the doctors did what they could to help the child, but they still had to release her back to the child welfare system. Mary felt helpless that the hospital couldn't do more to ensure the young girl's health and safety. She decided then that she would find a way to improve healthcare for kids in the child welfare system.



Mary and Rosemary at a CASA in-service on LGBTQ+ advocacy in April 2023.

Now Mary is working to do just that. She researched ways to get involved with foster care, which led her to CASA. Within a few days, connected with Advocate Supervisor Rosemary Allen. Rosemary explained what being a CASA is like; Mary was intrigued. As a medical student who works up to 100 hours a week, she was nervous about the commitment. She asked how else she could contribute. Rosemary shared an idea: Mary could lead an in-service training for CASA volunteers—something to expand their knowledge and help them better serve the children on their cases. Together they brainstormed topics with Program Manager Kari Frederick. They decided to focus on serving LGBTQ+ children in foster care. *(Continued inside)*

OUTCOMES UPDATE

January 1 - March 31, 2023

Our shared mission to provide a voice for children who have experienced abuse and neglect continues. We use outcomes to measure our progress. Thank you to our generous donors and committed volunteers for supporting this work.

- 16** Requests for a CASA volunteer
- 136** Children served
- 82** Active volunteers
- 75** Court reports written
- 11** Children who achieved permanency

ADVOCACY: YEARS IN THE MAKING

CASA of Kent County has some bittersweet news to share: after many years of service, two of our beloved advocate supervisors, Deb Kammer and Rosemary Allen, will retire from their positions later this year. Please join us in thanking them for their dedication to CASA of Kent County and wishing them well in their next steps!



Deb Kammer

Deb has been involved with CASA in some capacity since the beginning of the program. More than 30 years ago, she worked for the Honorable Judge Carpenter, who began the program in 1992. Since then, Deb has worked tirelessly to support the mission of best-interest advocacy for children in the Kent County family court. She joined the staff as a part-time advocate supervisor in 2010.

During her time at CASA, Deb has been known for her incredible work ethic, generous spirit, and love of popcorn! Deb has formed deep relationships with the volunteers she supervises and has even taken 9 cases as a volunteer herself, outside of working hours. Deb has repeatedly demonstrated her love of children and her desire for them to have the resources and support they need to thrive.

Deb's supervisor, Kari, shared, "Deb, we can't thank you enough for helping to start the CASA program in Kent County. It's because of your involvement that children in Kent County have a voice in court and one consistent adult advocating for their needs and wishes. You always make sure the child's best interest is front and center when coaching and supporting your volunteers." Thank you, Deb, for dedicating so much of your life to championing CASA's mission!



Rosemary Allen

Rosemary started as an advocate supervisor at CASA of Kent County nearly 18 years ago—on October 7, 2005. During her time here, she supervised dozens of wonderful CASA volunteers who served hundreds of children in our community and took 13 cases as a volunteer herself. Rosemary saw CASA through many moments of growth, including the transition to become a nonprofit in 2006.

Rosemary is best known around the office for her passion for CASA's mission, her tenacious advocacy for children, and her generous gifts of locally baked goods! She shared, "The past 17 years were some of the best in my life! I always looked forward to working with stellar advocates, and at the end of the day, I knew our work was significant. Not everyone gets to experience that."

Kari shared her thoughts as Rosemary's supervisor. "Rose has been an amazing advocate for children and families. She is very thorough when connecting families to community resources. Rose is a fierce advocate, especially when it comes to special education services for children. She has always been very persistent in making sure children's educational needs are being met." Thank you, Rosemary for your dedication to CASA's mission and the children in our community!

ADVOCACY FOR LGBTQ+ YOUTH, CONTINUED

If you're familiar with CASA, you're likely aware of the hardships children face in the child welfare system. Foster care can be even more traumatic when a child has one or more marginalized identities. These struggles are why CASA so strongly believes that children should have a court appointed special advocate to represent their best interests in court.

Children who identify as LGBTQ+ are overrepresented in foster care (childrensrights.org). Nationally, LGBTQ+ youth are much more likely to be kicked out or rejected by their families because of their LGBTQ+ identity. These youth are also at higher risk of verbal and physical harassment in group care. To provide best-interest advocacy for children in Kent County, it is essential for CASA volunteers and community members to understand the harsh reality of being LGBTQ+ in the foster care system.

During the volunteer in-service, Mary described scenarios of how a child or teen might bring up LGBTQ+ topics and shared tips on how to respond in a respectful, affirming way. While the possible realities of child advocacy are infinite, Mary summarized some essential steps when supporting a CASA child who may be struggling with an issue related to their LGBTQ+ identity.

1. **Validate and empathize.**
2. **Reassure the child or teen that you are a safe person for them to talk to.**
3. **Use open-ended questions.**
4. **Reflect the child's or teen's words back to them.**
5. **Let the child or teen set the pace for conversation and disclosure.**
6. **Clarify when needed.**
7. **Thank the child or teen for opening up to you.**

Mary's wise advice applies not only to volunteers working with children and teens who identify as LGBTQ+, but also all volunteers who advocate for vulnerable children.



CASA of Kent County is excited and honored to receive the Emerging Leaders United (ELU) microgrant from the Heart of West Michigan United Way. Thanks to the ELU fund, CASA received \$3,000 to support our program's growth, enabling us to serve 20 additional children this fiscal year.

On May 16, CASA's executive director, Stephanie, and development coordinator, Sam, attended a Coffee in the Community event hosted by the ELU committee. They were able to network with other attendees, talk about CASA's mission of advocacy, and learn more about the other grant recipient, ImmiGreatness.

We are so grateful for this opportunity, not only to fund our mission, but also to connect with this group of local professionals committed to empowering youth in our community and investing in a more equitable West Michigan.

A NOTE FROM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR STEPHANIE SHELER

When preparing for CASA of Kent County's 2023 Annual Luncheon, we knew we wanted to share stories of children and teens waiting for a court appointed special advocate. These stories help convey the need for volunteers and financial support to carry out CASA's mission. So, I grabbed the pile of requests for a CASA volunteer and read through them.

When reviewing a child's case file, I start with the family court petition. Written by a Children's Protective Services worker to a judge, the petition outlines abuse and neglect allegations. When the CASA office receives a new case file, it means a judge has ordered a child's removal.

Reading about the lived experiences of the most vulnerable members of our community is never easy. The stories include details about what you might expect—physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and severe neglect and deprivation—but every child or teen's experience is unique.

For the luncheon, we wrote four stories of children and teens waiting for a CASA, changing details to protect confidentiality. These stories were brought to life by the Godwin Heights High School students who read them. Although nervous to speak in front of a large crowd, these students were determined to **be the voice** for children who have experienced abuse and neglect by sharing true stories written in the first person.

Thank you for volunteering, donating, and spreading the word about the need in our community. YOU are part of CASA too. You recognize the importance of our vision: **a voice for every child**. Together, we will make Kent County a place where all children thrive.



Stephanie Sheler

ready to grow

CASA OF KENT COUNTY Annual Luncheon 2023

On April 27, 330 volunteers, donors, board members, staff, and guests gathered at Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park for CASA of Kent County's largest event to date.

Attendees came together to hear multiple people share their experiences with CASA. During the program, 17th Circuit Family Court Judge Patrick Hillary discussed how helpful he finds CASA reports when making case decisions. CASA volunteer Marni Vyn described what it was like connecting to her CASA child. Finally, four students from Godwin Heights High School read stories from the perspectives of real teens whose lives have been impacted by abuse and neglect and who are currently waiting for CASA volunteers.

The event was an emotional and impactful reminder of the effect a court appointed special advocate can have on a child's life.

330

Total attendees

194

Total individual/
household donors

36

Attendees interested
in volunteering

130+

First-time guests

95

First-time donors

\$78,320

Amount raised



Student volunteers from Godwin Heights High School share the stories of real children waiting for a CASA volunteer. Photo: Deb Hoag

This year's luncheon was special for many reasons: the new location, the record-breaking number of guests, and both new and familiar faces in the crowd. One of the most notable features of the event was the partnership between CASA and Godwin Heights High School, which was facilitated by Kent School Services Network. Earlier this year, CASA's executive director, Stephanie Sheler, and program manager, Kari Frederick, visited Ms. Christina Williams' practical law class at Godwin Heights to give a presentation on the family court system, foster care, and the advocacy role of CASAs. Then the entire class attended the luncheon as a field trip. Four talented students even volunteered to participate in the luncheon program.



Table host MeiLi Wieringa and her guests in front of the Linen & Lime Co. photo backdrop. Photo: Mallory Chrisman

Thank you to our sponsors!

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SAVE THE DATE!

Heart of CASA
October 19, 2023
The High Five GR

DONOR SPOTLIGHT

Kay Bylenga



Kay Bylenga became a CASA volunteer in 2004. In the 19 years since then, she has filled many essential supportive roles within the program: CASA volunteer, training coordinator, board member, sponsor, and donor. Kay has dedicated much of her life to supporting child advocacy and continues to champion CASA's mission in the community.

Kay's advocate supervisor, Amy, shared, "It's not possible to encapsulate how extraordinary Kay Bylenga is with a sentence or two. She's spent her adult life championing the rights of children in many ways. She's truly one of a kind, and I'm grateful to be a part of her work."

This year, for her 70th birthday, Kay wanted to do something special. She decided that in lieu of gifts, she wanted loved ones to contribute to a cause close to her heart: advocacy for children in foster care. Kay requested that all gifts at her party be donations to CASA of Kent County; she even invited the staff to attend! They enjoyed a wonderful celebration of a dedicated advocate and supporter. Thank you, Kay, for your generosity and commitment to CASA's mission!

ARE YOU INTERESTED IN LEARNING WHAT IT TAKES TO BECOME A CASA VOLUNTEER?

The work of our CASA volunteers is crucial to the success of our program. With so many children waiting for the advocacy of a CASA, we need more volunteers to meet that need. Our next training cohort will begin September 5.

Want to learn more?
Join us for a virtual info session!

July 17, NOON, or August 7, 6:00 PM
Contact us for the Zoom link!

casakentco.org/volunteer

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

Leslie Christian

Leslie wanted to help kids in the foster care system, but fostering wasn't right for her and her husband. When she discovered she could work with children as an advocate, she "knew this was the next best thing." She completed CASA training in 2011 and took on three consecutive family court cases. For one of these, she was part of a co-CASA team advocating for six children. After a break, Leslie returned as a CASA in 2020 and chose to retake training to refresh her knowledge. A very experienced volunteer, Leslie is now on her fourth case as an advocate.

During Leslie's initial training, she learned about the importance and nuance of reuniting families. She used to believe removal was necessary most of the time. Once she understood the effort and supports put in place to reunite families, her perspective shifted. She explained, "Now I know the depth of trauma that is experienced from removal."



"Volunteering with CASA will change you deeply. You will have your heart broken. You will be humbled when you realize how complicated the foster care system is. You will see hope in action as you work with case managers, attorneys, and social workers."

As for her favorite part of CASA work, Leslie loves "being a sleuth." She enjoys reviewing files, creating a case timeline, and interviewing people to fill in gaps and put the pieces together. Reflecting on what she would tell a prospective CASA, she said "Volunteering with CASA will change you deeply. You will have your heart broken. You will be humbled when you realize how complicated the foster care system is. You will see hope in action as you work with case managers, attorneys, and social workers."

Leslie is still a volunteer advocate as well as a frequent administrative volunteer. She supports CASA's program by helping around the office, serving on the volunteer team at CASA events, and even writing book reviews for us to share on social media.

Thank you, Leslie, for your commitment to CASA's mission!



CASA DAY AT THE CAPITOL

Did you know that CASA receives funding from the State of Michigan's Department of Health and Human Services? This money goes through Michigan CASA, our state organization, and flows to local programs to help them grow. In 2022, Michigan CASA received \$1 million from the State. CASA of Kent County's portion enabled us to add a part-time advocate supervisor, making it possible for more CASA volunteers to advocate for more children.

Spring is the time when state legislators work on the next year's budget. In May, CASA of Kent County's executive director, Stephanie, and development coordinator, Sam, gathered in Lansing with individuals from other CASA programs across Michigan to advocate for continued inclusion in the State budget. CASA employees and volunteers met with state senators and representatives from their districts. Stephanie and Sam met with those who represent Kent County to express gratitude for CASA's inclusion in last year's budget, share how vital state funding is for our program, and request their support for continued funding.

After meetings with legislators, Stephanie and Sam also got to explore the Michigan State Capitol, network with other CASA staff and volunteers, and learn about CASA's impact in counties across the State! Thank you, Michigan CASA, for organizing a great and impactful event, and thank you, Kent County legislators, for taking the time to meet with us!

How you can help

Volunteer

Be a voice for a child in need. CASA of Kent County trains new volunteers four times a year. To learn more, visit our website or give us a call. We'd be happy to chat.

Spread the word

Tell others about CASA of Kent County and the needs of children who have experienced abuse or neglect. Encourage them to learn more and to visit our website.

Donate

Consider donating to support CASA's mission of advocacy. Donations are accepted online or by mailed check. If you would like to learn about other options, reach out to us.

Contact us

casa@kentcountymi.gov
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616.632.5311

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Advocate Supervisor





KENT COUNTY

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CASA CONNECT SUMMER 2023

INSIDE

- Advocacy for LGBTQ+ Youth
- Advocacy: Years in the Making
- Partnership in Community
- Ready to Grow:
Annual Luncheon 2023
- Donor Spotlight
- Volunteer Spotlight
- CASA Day at the Capitol