

# CASA CONNECT

## FEATURED STORY • A JUDGE REQUESTS A CASA

*A note from Stephanie Sheler, Executive Director*

I don't often receive correspondence directly from judges, but on May 2, 2023, at 10:55 pm, a family court judge emailed with the subject line **"Help!"** The message opened with, **"Can I get a CASA for another case, please?!!!"** Clearly, this judge was concerned about the children, a sibling group of six.

The next morning, CASA staff dug into the case and learned more about each child: four boys and two girls ranging in age from three to 12. They were living with their mother and her boyfriend, and their father visited occasionally. Child Protective Services got involved due to an allegation of sexual abuse.

An investigation uncovered stories of extensive, ongoing sexual abuse by the mother's boyfriend. The foster care caseworker explored the family's situation and learned that the mother struggled with addiction, which kept her connected to her boyfriend. The judge ordered that the children be removed from their home for their own safety.

Unfortunately, the children couldn't be placed with their father. While he was a safe and loving parent, he was not able to care for them. As a result, the children went to

live with their paternal aunt. As you can imagine, caring for six traumatized children wasn't easy. Trauma survivors struggle with self-regulation and have limited coping skills; as a result, they often act out aggressively. The judge recognized they were **"a handful,"** and their aunt wasn't sure how much longer she could manage. The potential loss of this kinship placement is what prompted the judge's emphatic request to CASA. She wanted the children and their aunt to **"have someone else in their corner."**

For a CASA volunteer, a case like this is daunting. The sheer number of siblings and the severity of their trauma would be overwhelming to most volunteers. CASA staff decided to approach this case by finding two CASAs who would work together to support this family.

*(continued inside)*

## OUTCOMES UPDATE

April 1 – June 30, 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.

- 13** Requests for a CASA volunteer
- 141** Children served
- 91** Active volunteers
- 60** Court reports written
- 8** Newly trained volunteers
- 33** Children achieved permanency



# MEN AT THE MITTEN



## Recruiting male CASA volunteers

Did you know that 49% of the children CASA of Kent County serves are boys, but only 14% of volunteers are men? Having a positive male role model can make a big difference in the lives of boys in foster care—especially since most child welfare staff are women. CASA wants to close the gender gap in volunteer representation.

In June, at the Mitten Brewing Company, we held our first-ever volunteer recruitment event targeted to men. Current male CASA volunteers gathered with community members to share their experiences as court appointed special advocates. It was a fun evening filled with pizza, drinks, and engaging conversation. Reflecting on the event, CASA volunteer Chad said, “The opportunity to engage with other West Michigan guys who wanted to learn more about our mission, the work, and what it takes to play a role was awe-inspiring. It was awesome to have the opportunity to help spread the word in a comfortable, relaxed setting.”

A total of 25 people met to discuss how to improve advocacy for boys in Kent County. Three men have already signed up for CASA volunteer training in September, and we hope others join the November cohort. We are committed to our goal of diverse representation among CASA volunteers to best meet the needs of the children we serve.

If you or someone you know is looking for a way to give back to the community, consider becoming a CASA volunteer. Scan the QR code below to visit our website and learn more.



[casakentco.org/how-to-help/volunteer-information/](https://casakentco.org/how-to-help/volunteer-information/)

## FEATURED STORY, CONTINUED

Thankfully, at the end of July, two veteran co-CASAs were ready for a new case. They reviewed the information about the children and said yes immediately. Since being appointed by the judge, the volunteers have met with the caseworker, observed the children’s interaction with their father, and visited the three foster homes the children moved into after leaving their aunt’s. They learned about what the children enjoy: swimming in the lake, riding bikes, cheerleading, gardening, board games, and toys. They also heard what the children want: to be together and stay in their current schools.

**Now the advocacy begins. The two CASAs can voice the siblings’ wishes in court.**

Thank YOU for your partnership with CASA.



Stephanie Sheler  
Executive Director

# CHIPPING FOR CHARITY



## Golfing for a good cause

For 35 years, local accounting firm EHTC has devoted its annual golf outing, Chipping for Charity, to raising money for community organizations. Our staff and board of directors were ecstatic when CASA of Kent County was selected as the company’s official charity partner for 2023.

On June 27, CASA staff, board members, and friends joined EHTC and its guests for a fun day at Scott Lake Golf & Practice Center. Golfers spent the early morning mingling, learning about CASA’s mission, and preparing for the big day ahead. Soon after, the shotgun start signaled the beginning of the 18-hole scramble. CASA staff enjoyed greeting golfers at the 9th hole, providing more information, and answering questions. It was an excellent way to spread the word about CASA’s mission and work to hundreds of guests!

The event ended with a casual reception and cookout dinner. The winners of the outing, raffle baskets, and special contests were announced, and EHTC representatives presented CASA staff and board members with their total gift for the event: \$22,000! In CASA executive director Stephanie Sheler’s words:

“EHTC is building a strong legacy in the community, and CASA was honored to be part of that in 2023. We appreciated this opportunity to tell others about CASA’s mission, and we are so thankful for the funds donated by EHTC, their sponsors, and all the golfers!”



# WE ARE STRONGER TOGETHER

HEART OF CASA 2023

JOIN US FOR AN EVENING OF  
REFLECTION AND HOPE

Thursday, October 19, 2023

5:30 - 6:15 Cocktail hour and networking

6:15 - 8:30 Dinner, award ceremony, and program

The High Five

19 La Grave Ave. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49503

\$50 per person

RSVP at [tiny.cc/heartofcasa](https://tiny.cc/heartofcasa) or scan the QR code

Please respond by 10.10

Business attire

If you need assistance with registration or would like to sponsor this event, contact Samantha Johnson at 616.632.5230 or [samantha.johnson@kentcountymi.gov](mailto:samantha.johnson@kentcountymi.gov).



## VOLUNTEER APPRECIATION

Throughout the office, staff agree that Advocate Supervisor Amy Smith says it best when she describes CASA volunteers as “extraordinary humans.” Not surprisingly, one of the CASA staff’s favorite events is our annual volunteer appreciation celebration!

CASA volunteers commit time throughout the year to advocate for children, so we love to throw a proper party to express our gratitude for their hard work. So far during fiscal year 2023, 93 CASA volunteers have advocated for 164 children in Kent County. This tremendous impact is only possible with the generous donation of time from dedicated volunteer advocates. CASA Program Manager Kari Frederick said, “It’s a priority for us that volunteers feel appreciated, important, and connected to the program. Volunteer appreciation is more than just saying ‘thank you.’ It’s a way to show our volunteers that we care about them and appreciate their hard work.”

CASA volunteers and their guests gathered with CASA staff and board members at the Prince Conference Center on August 18 to celebrate a job well done. Guests mingled and shared updates about their experiences. Everyone enjoyed a delicious taco bar and yummy desserts. Each CASA volunteer received tickets to enter a raffle for a chance to win a variety of prize baskets. They also received novelty awards based on their unique personalities, which included everything from the “Sherlock Holmes” award for the best investigator to the “Needle and Thread” award for leaving everyone in stitches.

Thank you, CASA volunteers, for spending the evening with us, and—of course—for the generous gift of your time and advocacy for vulnerable children in our community!



## NOVEMBER TRAINING

CASA of Kent County is looking for dedicated community members to join our November training cohort! Do you have time and compassion to spare? Consider becoming a court appointed special advocate.

The work of our CASA volunteers is crucial to the success of our program. With children waiting for the advocacy of a CASA, we need more volunteers to meet that need. We’d love to chat about how you can get involved by joining our November training class.

Scan the code or visit:  
[casakentco.org/how-to-help/volunteer-information/](https://casakentco.org/how-to-help/volunteer-information/)

Or contact us:  
[casa@kentcountymi.gov](mailto:casa@kentcountymi.gov)  
616.632.5311





**DONOR SPOTLIGHT**

## Kym Matthews



Several years ago, Kym Matthews met former CASA volunteer and current Michigan CASA employee Janice Fonger at a networking “power lunch” hosted by WGVU radio host Shelley Irwin. For Kym, this was the introduction into a community she is now passionate about. Janice invited Kym to attend CASA of Kent County’s annual luncheon with her, and Kym was moved by CASA’s mission to advocate for abused and neglected children. She noted how impactful it was that “a judge saw that kids needed someone to be comfortable around” during their time in the child welfare system. As a mother, Kym was struck by the importance of advocacy, drawing on her personal experience of advocating for her own children. She said, “I love that it’s everyday people” advocating for children in our community.

After her first CASA luncheon, Kym wanted to contribute in any way she could. She felt that volunteering wasn’t the right fit, so she donated what she could manage and told everyone about CASA’s program. As a small-business owner and community member, Kym has established a network of friends, colleagues, and clients with whom she discusses the topics she’s passionate about—like CASA. Each year, Kym has attended the CASA luncheon and brought a friend. One year, she brought along her neighbor, who became a CASA volunteer and took a case advocating for two children. Kym continued to pursue her goal of raising awareness for CASA’s mission, saying, “If I can’t donate regularly, I can bring people.”

Before the 2023 luncheon, Kym reached out to CASA of Kent County staff and graciously volunteered to host a table of her friends. She brought members of her community with her to learn about how they can be involved in supporting CASA’s mission. Kym also decided to become a monthly donor, a goal that she has been working toward. Kym expressed her gratitude for CASA’s presence in the community, saying, “I’m so glad I get to be a small part of this organization and let people know how cool it is.... It’s an important mission. Kids are our future.”

Thank you, Kym, for your continued support of CASA as both a donor and an ambassador!



Janice and Kym, CASA Annual Luncheon, Spring 2023 | Photo credit: Mallory Chrisman Photography

**VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT**

## Tish Stevenson



Meet Tish! She completed CASA training in January 2022 and has already worked on three cases. Tish shared, “I intentionally retired from my role as a school counselor to do something unpaid because I knew that there’s really important work being done in our community by volunteers.” Initially wanting to work with refugees, Tish was moved by CASA’s mission after seeing a billboard and exploring the program.

Although she had experience working with families and Child Protective Services as a school counselor and mandated reporter, CASA training helped Tish realize that she still had a lot more to learn about foster care and the child welfare system. Training taught Tish how the court system works and prepared her for her first case.

Tish now understands how many community members coordinate to help children and families in need. She knew the system is overburdened and that some children fall through the cracks, “but seeing it is a whole different experience.” In fact, one of Tish’s favorite parts of being a volunteer is knowing that in her own way she is a part of the community solution to child abuse and neglect.

When asked what she would say to prospective CASA volunteers, Tish answered, “You think you can anticipate what it’s going to be like, but you can never know the rich lessons you’ll learn until you do it... it’s such a growing experience.” Her personal motto: “bite off more than you can chew and then chew it!”



# VISIT THE NEW CASAKENTCO.ORG!

CASA of Kent County’s new website is NOW LIVE! We are excited to share this new tool that will help us stay connected to YOU, the CASA community!



Visit [casakentco.org](https://casakentco.org)  
Scan the code with your smartphone to check it out!

## 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

[casakentco.org](mailto:casakentco.org)  
[casakentco.org](mailto:casakentco.org)  
616.632.5311

## Our Team

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**KENT COUNTY**

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# CASA CONNECT FALL 2023

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