

**BE THEIR  
VOLUNTEER  
HOPE  
CHAMPION  
VOICE  
ADVOCATE...**



# SO THEY CAN BE KIDS.

**Court Appointed Special Advocates  
of Kent County provides a voice for  
every child.**

## **Mission**

To empower community members to advocate for abused and neglected children by being their voice in court.

## **Vision**

A voice for every child.

## **Partners**

Michigan CASA  
National CASA/GAL Association for Children  
Heart of West Michigan United Way

## **Contact us**

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# A note from Executive Director Stephanie Sheler

As I write this letter, a photo of a boy named Johnny\* sits on my desk. He has an infectious grin and is missing his two front teeth. As I gaze at his face, I'm reminded of the collective effort of our community in supporting Johnny, his siblings, and their parents as they journey through the child welfare system.

First, Johnny and his siblings have two **court appointed special advocates**, a husband and wife team, assigned to their case. They have spent the past two years building relationships, gathering information about the family's history, recommending services for the parents, and providing reports to the judge. This remarkable volunteer duo has poured their heart, soul, and wisdom into advocating for the best interests of these children.

Additionally, Johnny's entire family is surrounded by a **network of child welfare professionals**. CASA is thankful to work with judges, clerks, court-appointed attorneys, and foster care caseworkers to support vulnerable children and parents. These professionals care deeply about children in our community and use their knowledge and expertise to bring stability to the family.

And then there are our **dedicated donors and foundations** that are passionately committed to funding the mission of advocacy for children in Kent County. They support Johnny's family and others by giving generously and inspiring people in their circles of influence to join CASA's mission.

Johnny's picture comes back into my view. This photo, taken by his CASA volunteers, isn't meant for me. It's on its way to the judge in Johnny's case, along with the report written by his advocates. The judge will see Johnny's smiling face as he makes the important decisions about what is next for this family.

Working together, united in CASA's mission of advocacy, the community walking with Johnny and many other children provides HOPE. As professionals in the field of child welfare, CASA staff knows that all of YOU, as integral parts of this community, are the ones **who offer HOPE to hurting children**. It is because of you—partners, donors, volunteers, and stakeholders—that CASA can walk alongside children until they find safe, stable, and permanent homes.

**Thank you for making Kent County a place where all children and their families can flourish.**



*Stephanie Sheler*

\*Name changed to protect confidentiality.

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### Meg Tevlin Advocate Supervisor

# CASA Children

During fiscal year 2023, 690 children in Kent County were living in foster care because of abuse or neglect that took place in their homes. Some of these children, who carry the weight of profound and complex trauma, were referred to CASA by a network of concerned parties, including judges, attorneys, foster care workers, and foster parents.

The cases referred to CASA included a teenage girl grappling with feelings of rejection that stemmed from living in so many different foster homes, a boy with autism, who spent long days alone in a locked room, and a medically fragile infant, who endured a nine-month hospital stay.

Yet, amid the tumult, each of these children found the support of a consistent adult figure—their court appointed special advocate—as they navigated an overstrained child welfare system.

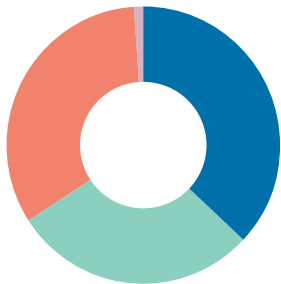
170

Children served

55% male 45% female

62

Closed cases



Age

37% 0 – 5 years  
29% 6 – 12 years  
33% 13 – 18 years  
1% 19 – 21 years

Race

49% Caucasian  
32% African American  
11% Hispanic  
4% Multiracial  
2% Asian  
2% Native American

## 2023 Financials

FY23 Revenue

\$690,592

27% Court  
14% Foundations and Grants  
39% Donations  
12% Employee Retention Credit  
8% Other

FY23 Expenses

\$655,981

63% Program  
20% Management  
17% Fundraising

FY23 Endowment Contributions

\$3,703

FY23 Endowment Balance  
Ending 9/30/2023

\$149,926

Donors

417

Individuals/  
Households

37

Businesses

6

Foundations

7

Court/Churches/  
Nonprofits





**“The CASA  
volunteer provided  
incredible stability  
for a child whose  
whole life was turned  
upside down.”**

Foster Parent

## CASA Volunteers

CASA volunteers are often described as “extraordinary,” a fitting label for individuals who embark on a rigorous journey to become advocates for children in need. Following an application process and 30 hours of comprehensive training, these volunteers are sworn in by a judge as officers of the 17th Circuit Court Family Division. They then select a case and dedicate themselves to advocating for a child or sibling group until the case reaches resolution. The commitment they make is indeed remarkable, spanning the entire duration of a case, which typically lasts nearly three years.

Despite their exceptional dedication, CASA volunteers are also ordinary individuals who have made a conscious choice to invest in the welfare of children within their community. Throughout fiscal year 2023, volunteers ranged in age from 24 to 84, representing a diverse spectrum of backgrounds and experiences. Some are employed full time, others part time, and some are retired. While some possess professional or educational backgrounds related to child welfare, many do not. It is this diversity that enriches their advocacy efforts, allowing each volunteer to bring a unique perspective to their role in supporting children in need.

# 96

### Active volunteers

**86%** female

**14%** male

# 28

### Newly trained volunteers

### Years of service

**23%** <1 year

**41%** 2 – 3 years

**14%** 4 – 5 years

**15%** 6 – 9 years

**7%** 10+ years

# CASA Outcomes



When children are removed from their parents due to abuse or neglect, the family must navigate a complex child welfare system. In this space, CASA volunteers work alongside a team of dedicated professionals. Together, they strive to ensure the well-being of these children and their families, with the overarching goal of reunification whenever safe and appropriate.

In instances where reunification isn't feasible, CASA and other stakeholders explore alternative options such as adoption or guardianship. Tragically, some older teens "age out" of the system without finding a permanent home. Additionally, there are cases where CASA must withdraw before the court closes the case.

In the fiscal year of 2023, the court closed the cases of 62 children with a CASA, marking significant progress in our mission to advocate for and support vulnerable children in our community.

**39%**

**Adopted**

**21%**

**Reunified  
with parents**

**19%**

**CASA case closed  
before outcome  
determined\***

**15%**

**Placed in  
guardianship**

**6%**

**Aged out**

\*Includes CASA volunteers who were unable to keep their commitment, child location unknown, child transferred out of county, CASA discharged for personal safety.

## LOOKING AHEAD

In fiscal year 2024, CASA of Kent County aims to enlist the advocacy of 100 volunteers to advocate for 185 children. Your involvement is crucial in helping us achieve this objective. By staying connected with CASA, sharing our mission with others, recruiting volunteers, and offering financial support, you play a vital role in making a meaningful difference in the lives of vulnerable children in our community. Together, we can ensure that every child has a voice and the support they need to thrive.

**SAVE THE DATE  
2024 EVENTS**

**Annual Luncheon**  
April 25

**Heart of CASA**  
October 10



## Featured Partnership

# Isa, Kindra, Aria & Dawn

### Trouble is discovered

Isa and her twin sisters, Kindra and Aria, were removed from their parents' home in late 2019 when they were 12 and 7 years old. Someone in their circle of care had contacted Child Protective Services with concerns about the children, and when authorities investigated, Isa revealed that the children had experienced severe abuse for years. Isa said she and her sisters felt "scared, sad, and unsafe" with their mom and dad.

The sisters were removed from their home by a judge's emergency order. Isa was placed in the care of a family friend, and twins Kindra and Aria were placed in a foster home. All three girls also had to change schools, so they lost almost everything that was familiar to them.

### CASA gets involved

After a year, the judge decided he needed another perspective on the case, so he reached out to CASA of Kent County to request a court appointed special advocate. In late 2020, CASA volunteer Dawn agreed to take the case. She spent the first six months building a relationship with the children, then 13 and 8, reading the case history, observing parenting visits, and communicating with the caseworker. Every 90 days, she wrote a court report for the judge.

After several months, Dawn realized that Isa was struggling in her placement with the family friend. She felt torn between wanting to be with her sisters in their foster home and being loyal to her parents. This tension was causing tremendous anxiety. Not wanting the girls to grow apart, Dawn advocated for more frequent and longer sibling visits, which she often facilitated.

About a year after Dawn took the case, the judge suspended the visits with the girls' mother and father because they were no longer engaged in services necessary for reunification. At the same time, Dawn grew more concerned about Isa. She was struggling in school, worried about her twin sisters, and growing increasingly withdrawn. It became apparent that Isa's placement was no longer in her best interest.

### A turning point

Dawn recommended a change to the judge, and in the spring of 2022, Isa joined her little sisters in their foster home. It took some time for Isa to adjust, and even longer for her to realize that she no longer had to function as a parent to the twins and could enjoy being a teenage girl. By the time school started in August 2022, she couldn't wait for a fresh start.

The next several months were a roller coaster. Isa had frequent anxiety attacks and expressed mixed emotions about living with the foster family. However, she also made good friends in school, joined the volleyball team, and secured a part in the school play. Meanwhile, Kindra and Aria were thriving.

### Hopes realized

By early 2023, Isa, Kindra, and Aria told their CASA volunteer—and anyone who would listen—that they wanted to be adopted by the foster family. Isa, as the oldest, spoke for the twins when she told Dawn that they finally felt safe and cared for.

In late 2023, after three years on the case, Dawn had the privilege of witnessing the adoption of the three girls. While she might check in with the sisters and their parents occasionally, she knows her advocacy is no longer needed. It's time for her to move on to her next CASA case.





## 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.



## Donate

Your support gives a child hope through the gift of advocacy. To donate with a credit card, visit our website by scanning the code below.



## 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.