

# CASA CONNECT

## NEW BEGINNINGS: ESTHER AND HAILEY'S JOURNEY TO HEALING

Two young sisters, Esther and Hailey,\* were trapped in a world of chaos and uncertainty. Their mother's battle with substance use had turned their home into a dangerous environment.

Despite community support, the situation grew dire. Esther, drawn to dangerous objects around the house, eventually harmed herself with kitchen knives while unsupervised. With their father having chosen to remain absent and uninvolved, the girls were left without the protection of their parents.

A glimmer of hope emerged when Esther and Hailey moved into their grandparents' foster home, but trauma the sisters

experienced continued to manifest in challenging behaviors. Enter Kim, a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), who was appointed by the judge to give a voice to Esther and Hailey's best interests. Instead of seeing problems to be managed, Kim recognized the reality of Esther and Hailey's behaviors: The two children were working through deep emotional wounds.

Kim helped coordinate a network of support for Esther and Hailey. Her advocacy led to Esther's autism diagnosis and subsequent IEP in school, while Hailey received crucial trauma and ADHD evaluations. Kim's advocacy efforts opened doors to vital resources: mental health services, educational support, and even opportunities for joy through summer camp and art therapy.

When the grandparents made the decision to adopt Esther and Hailey, Kim helped strengthen the new family bond by advocating for family counseling and educational resources. Kim understood that healing happens not just individually but also as a family unit.

Today, Esther and Hailey are thriving in their forever home with their grandparents. Through Kim's compassionate advocacy, a story of trauma has transformed into one of hope and healing.

*\*Names and details have been changed to protect confidentiality.*



# WHAT TO EXPECT DURING CASA TRAINING: AN INSIDE LOOK

As a prospective CASA volunteer, you’re about to embark on a transformative learning journey. Here’s what you can expect from our comprehensive training program:

- 1. TRAINING COVERS A WIDE VARIETY OF TOPICS.**  
During CASA training, you’ll cover topics such as trauma, adverse childhood experiences, poverty, implicit bias, and more. It’s impossible to cover every situation you might encounter as a CASA volunteer, but our team will prepare you to advocate professionally regardless of the circumstances.
- 2. IT’S AN INTERACTIVE EXPERIENCE.**  
We make our training curriculum as interactive as possible. Expect to engage in group discussion, partner work, question/answer sessions, and more during CASA training.
- 3. TRAINING COHORTS FORM A BOND FROM LEARNING TOGETHER.**  
When you spend 30 hours together over the course of a month, it’s difficult not to become close. Often, our training cohorts leave training with a new group of CASA friends who root for each other on their respective advocacy journeys.
- 4. YOU’LL LEARN ABOUT THE LOCAL COURT SYSTEM.**  
CASA of Kent County’s volunteers serve the judges and referees of the 17th Circuit Court Family Division. During training, you’ll learn about the child welfare system, from a Child Protective Services complaint to permanency hearings.
- 5. CONDUCTING CASE STUDIES HELPS YOU LEARN ABOUT REAL-WORLD DILEMMAS.**  
One way that trainees practice decision-making skills is through case studies. During CASA training, expect to analyze and discuss hypothetical case scenarios with your classmates.
- 6. YOU’LL BE INTRODUCED TO A NEW STYLE OF WRITING.**  
As a CASA volunteer, you’ll submit quarterly reports to the judge. Your advocate supervisor will work with you to revise and edit your court reports so they provide pertinent, factual information. Our training teaches and prepares you to use this unique writing style and editing process.

- 7. GUEST SPEAKERS BRING ADDITIONAL KNOWLEDGE.**  
Our CASA staff regularly invite guest presenters to share their expertise during training. These professionals bring valuable real-world perspectives and insights to enhance your learning experience.
- 8. YOU’LL GET TO KNOW THE CASA STAFF.**  
The CASA program team lead training, which gives them the opportunity to get to know each trainee over the course of the month. During your training, you’ll be getting to know your future Advocate Supervisors!
- 9. TRAINING HELPS YOU MAKE AN INFORMED DECISION.**  
Becoming a CASA volunteer is a commitment. Part of training is learning even more nitty-gritty details about the role and determining that it’s right for you. By the end of the training process, we hope you’ll feel well-equipped to take your first case, or in some cases, that you have the knowledge you need to decide that being a CASA volunteer isn’t a good fit for your life right now. Our expert program staff will help guide you on your training journey!

- 10. YOU’LL HAVE FUN!**  
CASA training involves learning a lot of new information about some heavy topics. Our team does their best to deliver the information in an engaging way while also trying to keep a light and fun atmosphere. We want you and your classmates to stay energized and motivated to make a difference in your community.
- READY TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE?**  
CASA training is designed to be comprehensive, engaging, and supportive. Through these 30 hours of learning, you’ll gain the knowledge, skills, and confidence you need to advocate effectively for children in your community. Whether you’re just starting to explore the possibility of becoming a CASA volunteer or you’re ready to begin your training journey, we’re here to support you every step of the way!

“The training we received was very good and it was a great experience. The classes gave the right mix of policy and practice, with an emphasis on practice. We were fortunate to have a fantastic training class, with our classmates really leaning into the co-learning. Lots of role-play scenarios and casework helped make it all come together with realism.”  
**Paul Doyle**, CASA training class of September ’24



## START YOUR TRAINING JOURNEY

CASA of Kent County is looking for dedicated community members to join our 2025 training cohorts. 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 one of our upcoming training classes.

2025 training sessions will be held in May, September, and November. Each session consists of eight classes, which are held on Tuesday and Thursday nights from 5:30 – 8:30pm.



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

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

## A NOTE FROM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR STEPHANIE SHELER

I’ve often heard CASA volunteers referred to as superheroes. After all, they’re at the forefront, advocating for children who have experienced abuse and neglect. But calling them superheroes suggests they have a special set of powers that allow them to swoop in and tackle complex challenges with extraordinary, superhuman abilities. That’s not the reality.

CASA volunteers are not heroes—they are humans. And that’s exactly what makes their work so powerful. Their impact doesn’t come from superpowers but from dedication, empathy, and perseverance. First, they complete a rigorous training process to prepare for the difficult task of advocacy. Then, with careful thought and intention, they select a court case, committing fully to the child they’re assigned to. CASA volunteers build trust, listen deeply, and work to understand the child’s unique needs. They navigate the complexities of an overburdened child welfare system, knowing that progress requires collaboration and persistence. Through it all, they stay by the child’s side until a safe, loving, and permanent home is found.

And that’s why, in 2025, we’re excited to celebrate Humans of CASA of Kent County. This social media campaign, inspired by the ever-popular Humans of New York, gives us the chance to share the stories of all the incredible humans who invest in the lives of children and families connected to the child welfare system. Of course, we’ve highlighted CASA volunteers—but they aren’t the only ones making a difference. We’ve also featured a monthly donor who never misses an opportunity to share CASA’s mission, a banker who attended his first CASA event and became committed to the mission, and a foster care caseworker overwhelmed with gratitude for the CASA who made a life-changing impact on one of her cases. You can read these stories and more on our blog.

In this issue of CASA Connect, you’ll hear about Emily Schichtel, who supports CASA through her current role as Senior Community Impact Manager at Heart of West Michigan United Way, one of the grantor organizations that fund our program. We hope her story inspires you to share CASA’s mission with others and help us grow our network of supporters. There are many ways to get involved—whether it’s becoming a volunteer, attending an event, or donating a financial gift to support the life-changing role CASA of Kent County plays in a child’s journey.

With more children in need of advocates, we’re asking for your help to recruit the next group of CASA volunteers. You don’t need superpowers to change a life—just a heart for children and a commitment to stand by them when they need it most.

Thank you for being one of the humans who make this mission possible.



*Stephanie Sheler*  
Executive Director



To learn more, scan the code or visit [casakentco.org/humans](https://casakentco.org/humans)

## OUTCOMES UPDATE

October – December 2024

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.

15	REQUESTS FOR A CASA VOLUNTEER	56	COURT REPORTS WRITTEN
140	CHILDREN SERVED	10	NEWLY TRAINED VOLUNTEERS
86	ACTIVE VOLUNTEERS	17	CHILDREN ACHIEVED PERMANENCY





# THANK YOU, MELISSA!

Following nearly two years of service to CASA of Kent County, our Administrative Coordinator, Melissa Ronquist, has retired. Please join us in thanking Melissa for her generous dedication to CASA and wishing her well in this new stage of her life!

At CASA, Melissa is well-known for her generous nature, adventurous spirit, and impressively green thumb. Melissa worked behind the scenes, ensuring that volunteer training, swearing-in ceremonies, and other program events went off without a hitch. The CASA staff is especially grateful to Melissa for her willingness to lend a helping hand, going out of her way to support her coworkers and CASA’s mission of advocacy whenever possible.

**Reflecting on her time at CASA, Melissa shared:**

“I truly believe in CASA’s mission and am thankful for the opportunity to contribute to it in a small way. Working for CASA the final two years of my career was a wonderful and fulfilling experience. It was the perfect way for me to end my professional employment. I thoroughly enjoyed meeting all the staff, volunteers, board members, and other friends of CASA, like-minded people who care about abused and neglected children. Thank you all for your contributions to CASA.”

Thank you, Melissa, for your dedication to CASA.  
We wish you the best in your retirement!

## WAYS TO GIVE

Like many nonprofits in West Michigan, CASA of Kent County relies on the generous financial support of community organizations and individuals to change the lives of the area’s most vulnerable children. Gifts to CASA support the recruitment, screening, training, and supervision of our volunteers.

We are so grateful for the support of our community for making our work possible! Beyond one-time cash, check, and online gifts, there are a variety of other ways to support CASA financially that might fit with your personal preferences and philanthropic goals. Check out other ways to give below!

- Charitable IRA Gifts
- Donor Advised Funds
- Stock Gifts
- Planned Gifts
- Endowment Gifts

If you’re interested in supporting CASA through one or more of the above giving methods, please contact Stephanie Sheler at [stephanie.sheler@kentcountymi.gov](mailto:stephanie.sheler@kentcountymi.gov) or 616.632.5112.

**MONTHLY GIVING**

Your monthly gift provides essential financial resources for advocacy throughout the year.



Scan the code or visit [tiny.cc/CASAmnthlygift](https://tiny.cc/CASAmnthlygift)



## CASA OF KENT COUNTY Annual Luncheon 2025

Join us for our 2025 Annual Luncheon to drive home the importance of child advocacy in our community!

CASA of Kent County empowers community members to advocate for abused and neglected children by being their voice in family court. CASA volunteers provide dedicated best-interest advocacy for vulnerable children as they navigate the unfamiliar road of foster care.

Bring a friend and join us for lunch to learn how you can support CASA—whether by raising awareness, becoming a volunteer, or making a donation. Together, we will ensure that every vulnerable child has what they deserve: a safe, loving, and permanent home.

Lunch is complimentary, but we will gratefully accept your financial support. After lunch and our program, please enjoy free admission to the gardens.

### Friday, April 25

FREDERIK MEIJER GARDENS & SCULPTURE PARK

**ORDER OF EVENTS**

- Arrival & art show 11:30am – Noon
- Lunch & program Noon – 1:00pm
- Explore the gardens At your leisure

HUIZENGA GRAND ROOM  
Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park  
1000 E Beltline Ave. NE, Grand Rapids



RSVP using the QR code with the camera on your phone, or at [tiny.cc/casaluncheon](https://tiny.cc/casaluncheon)



# HUMANS OF CASA OF KENT COUNTY



Meet the humans of CASA:

Emily Schichtel

Emily Schichtel is a West Michigan girl through and through. Growing up in the area, attending Grand Valley State University, and being deeply rooted in the community she loves, it was a natural decision to dedicate her career to serving this region.

Emily has worked at Heart of West Michigan United Way for the past sixteen years. She began as an intern and liked it so much, she stayed. “I just found my home here,” she says. She has worked in multiple roles in multiple departments, but really enjoys her current role as Senior Community Impact Manager.

In her position, Emily oversees the allocation of resources raised by United Way, building relationships with partner agencies that provide direct services to the community. “I get to meet amazing, inspiring people and really get to know the community,” she says. “It’s a great role.” Her belief in United Way’s vision of “A thriving community for all” drives her work. While she admits it might sound idealistic, Emily is confident it’s possible. “If I didn’t believe in it, I wouldn’t be doing the work that I do.”

The passion for fostering a thriving community is what connected Emily to CASA of Kent County. Emily has learned more about CASA by overseeing the grant

funding they receive from the United Way. “I’m drawn to CASA’s mission and inspired by the volunteers who are willing to get so involved in a child’s life.” Emily also sees how the two organizations, although they operate differently, have missions that are deeply aligned. “A thriving community has to include safety for children,” she explains.

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Emily’s story is a reminder of the impact one person can have when they dedicate themselves to their community. Through her work at United Way and her support of organizations like CASA of Kent County, she demonstrates how working together and promoting safety for children can create a brighter, stronger future for all.



YOUR SUPPORT GIVES A CHILD HOPE THROUGH THE GIFT OF ADVOCACY.



To donate with a credit card, scan the QR code or visit [casakentco.org/how-to-help/donation-information](https://casakentco.org/how-to-help/donation-information)

### 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](https://casakentco.org)  
616.632.5311

### Partners

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

### Board Members

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Program Manager

Melissa Ronquist  
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Advocate Supervisor





# CASA CONNECT SPRING 2025

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