

CASA Connect provides regular updates from CASA of Kent County. CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) is the only local volunteer organization that empowers everyday community members to advocate for vulnerable children who have experienced abuse or neglect.

CASA CONNECT

FEATURED STORY • INCONVENIENCES, LARGE AND SMALL

A note from Stephanie Sheler, Executive Director

Adoption day

Recently, I had the privilege of being present in Judge Deborah McNabb's courtroom for three adoption hearings, and each left a unique impression. In the first, a grandmother formally adopted her teenage granddaughter after years of caring for her. The courtroom, aside from the caseworker and court personnel, stood quietly empty. In the second hearing, a father adopted his 9-year-old stepson, with the joyous presence of grandparents from both sides to witness this significant ceremony. The final hearing involved a foster family adopting a child who had been part of the CASA program. In attendance were her CASA volunteer and numerous friends and family, all gathering to celebrate the momentous occasion.

Parental responsibilities

While the circumstances of each adoption were different, Judge McNabb followed the same script. After describing the numerous responsibilities of parenting, including things like providing food, clothing, shelter, education, medical care, and more, she asked, "Do you understand that you will also be responsible for providing love, affection, and encouragement, and that there may be certain inconveniences, large and small?"

So many inconveniences

I must confess, I couldn't help but chuckle at first. I immediately thought of all the "inconveniences" I've encountered raising my own two boys. However, on reflection, I realize that the inconveniences persist even now that my children are adults. Elizabeth Stone's words resonate with me: "Making the decision to have a child is to forever have your heart go walking around outside your body." It truly feels that way. Not a day passes without me thinking about my boys navigating a world where uncertainties are around every corner.

Since those adoption hearings, I've thought a lot about being inconvenienced.

- Parenting is inconvenient.
- Caring for children or teens in any capacity is inconvenient.
- Being a foster parent is inconvenient.
- Being a court appointed special advocate is inconvenient.
- Giving financial resources to support vulnerable children is inconvenient.
- Any situation where we put someone else's needs before our own can be inconvenient.

(continued inside)

OUTCOMES UPDATE

October – December 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.

12	Requests for a CASA volunteer
133	Children served
78	Active volunteers
51	Court reports written
8	Newly trained volunteers
16	Children achieved permanency

THANK YOU, CLARE!

After more than seven years of faithful service to CASA of Kent County, our beloved administrative manager, Clare Parks, has retired. Please join us in thanking Clare for her dedication to CASA and wishing her well in her next steps!

During her time at CASA, Clare has been known for her superb organizational skills, her caring nature, and her reputation as the office comedian. The CASA of Kent County staff is grateful to Clare for her dedication, her leadership, and, of course, her hilarious one-liners. Although she didn't work directly with children in her role as administrative manager, Clare never lost sight of the mission of child advocacy.

Reflecting on her time at CASA, Clare shared, "Through all the good, bad, crazy, and fun times we've had here at CASA, there has always been one thing we have all worked together on in our own way: helping children find their way through the most difficult time in their lives. I'm so glad that I was able to be a part of this mission."

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



FEATURED STORY, CONTINUED

Embracing inconvenience

Yet if we aspire to build a community where every child can thrive, we find ourselves with no option but to embrace inconvenience for their sake. I extend my heartfelt gratitude to all CASA volunteers, board members, friends, and donors for your unwavering willingness to be inconvenienced for vulnerable children in Kent County. Your commitment lays the foundation for a brighter future for these children.



Stephanie Sheler
Executive Director



DRUGS 101: MYTHS, TRENDS, AND OPPORTUNITIES TO INTERVENE

In late 2023, CASA of Kent County Executive Director Stephanie Sheler was presented with an interesting opportunity: a partnership with Corewell Health Addiction Clinics. With the knowledge that addiction and substance use affect many families involved in the Kent County child welfare system, Stephanie was eager to work with Corewell to create a learning opportunity for the community. Longtime CASA supporters Dick and Diane Sherlock connected Stephanie with their daughter Cecily Heaton, an operations manager at Corewell Health. Cecily then looped in her colleagues Dr. Colleen Lane and Daniel Wicklund, RN, who launched Corewell Health Addiction Clinics around Michigan.

The idea was simple: Corewell Health would provide the training and CASA would recruit trainees. When Warner Norcross + Judd joined as an event partner and host for both in-person and online attendance, the event only grew more promising. On January 22, 2024, CASA volunteers, court personnel, foster care agency workers, MDHHS staff, and other interested community members came together for an informative presentation titled Drugs 101: Myths, Trends, and Opportunities to Intervene.

Colleen and Dan presented invaluable information about common illicit drugs currently in the Grand Rapids community and throughout the rest of the country. They also highlighted current treatment options and harm reduction techniques for people who are struggling with substance use disorder. One specific treatment option was even distributed at the event. Guests were encouraged to take a box of Narcan home so they would have a valuable treatment for opioid overdose.

The presentation was met with overwhelmingly positive feedback from attendees, reaffirming the fact that many West Michigan community members care deeply about substance use treatment and prevention. The ability to host guests in person and online was a major key to the event's success. We are thankful to Corewell Health and Warner Norcross + Judd, who made this informative, motivating event possible.

Harm Reduction

Harm reduction is an approach that promotes health in a way that meets people where they are, accepting that not everyone is ready or capable of stopping their substance use at a given time (Recovery Research Institute).



1. CASA Executive Director Stephanie Sheler poses with Colleen Lane, MD, FASAM, AAHIVS, and Daniel Wicklund, DNPc, RN, CARN, from Corewell Health Addiction Clinics. 2. Guests gather in the Warner Norcross + Judd conference room for the Drugs 101 presentation.

COREWELL HEALTH ADDICTION CLINIC LOCATIONS

Grand Rapids, Lakeview, Reed City, Greenville, Muskegon, Big Rapids, Ludington, Fremont

Corewell Health Grand Rapids Addiction Clinic
75 Sheldon Blvd. SE, Suite 100, Grand Rapids, MI 49503

NARCAN PICKUP LOCATIONS IN GRAND RAPIDS

Corewell Health Grand Rapids Urgent Care – Alpine
2332 Alpine Ave. NW, Grand Rapids, MI 49544

Corewell Health Primary Care – Gaslight
2249 Wealthy St. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49506

Corewell Health Addiction Clinic – Grand Rapids
75 Sheldon Ave. SE, Suite 100, Grand Rapids, MI 49503

Corewell Health Grand Rapids Hospitals – Care Center
2750 Beltline Ave. NE, Grand Rapids, MI 49525

Corewell Health Grand Rapids Lemmen-Holton Cancer Center, 145 Michigan St. NE, Grand Rapids, MI 49503

HERE COMES THE SUN

YOU'RE INVITED TO THE CASA OF KENT COUNTY ANNUAL LUNCHEON

Thursday, April 25

Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park

It's been a long, cold, lonely winter, but here comes the sun! Won't you join us for our 2024 annual luncheon to shine a light on 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. Often the CASA volunteer is the one committed adult who stays with the child until they find a safe, permanent home.

Invite a friend and join us for lunch to learn how you can support CASA by building awareness, becoming a volunteer, or donating to support our mission. Together, we will create a brighter future for vulnerable children in our community through individualized advocacy.

Lunch is complimentary, but we will gratefully accept your financial support.

After lunch and our program, enjoy free admission to the gardens.

ORDER OF EVENTS

Arrival & networking	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.



THE FACES OF CASA: WELCOME, NEW BOARD MEMBERS!

CASA of Kent County has welcomed some new faces to the board of directors, and we'd like to introduce them!



KEVIN NELSON

HEART OF WEST MICHIGAN
UNITED WAY, SENIOR DONOR
DEVELOPMENT MANAGER

A native of metro Detroit, Kevin was born and raised in Garden City, Michigan. He is a graduate of Northwood University with a Bachelor of Business Administration degree focused on marketing and advertising management. Kevin currently works on the team at Heart of West Michigan United Way as Senior Donor Development Manager. In this role, he guides donor development strategy, manages the individual donor pipeline, and works closely with all areas of the organization to better position United Way for success. Kevin also leads the annual operations of United Way's Emerging Leaders United group.

Kevin was introduced to CASA of Kent County when he attended the 2022 Heart of CASA dinner. He was moved to get involved, and in 2023, he was honored to return to Heart of CASA as the event's emcee. Kevin's values and life experiences draw him to CASA's vision of a voice for every child, as he adamantly believes we must invest in organizations that work toward creating communities we wish to see. Kevin is also an avid volunteer and advocate for several other local nonprofits that serve and uplift children and families to live more prosperous lives.

In his free time, Kevin can be found learning new things, traveling, attending community events, spending time with loved ones, cooking, and baking!



KRISTEN SNYDER

COREWELL HEALTH,
PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT,
ASSOCIATE CHIEF OF MEDICAL
INFORMATICS OFFICER

Kristen grew up in Saginaw, Michigan, where her passion for helping children was sparked at a young age as she watched her mother, an elementary school teacher, work with students. She attended Western Michigan University and became a physician assistant. Kristen moved to Grand Rapids to complete her surgical residency, took a position at Helen DeVos Children's Hospital working in Pediatric Surgery and Trauma, and remained in that role for 23 years. Kristen also received a master's degree in APP Education and Ethics in 2002. She currently works at Corewell Health as Associate Chief Medical Informatics Officer. She loves to teach medical professional students and surgeons across the state.

Kristen was first introduced to CASA while serving as an expert witness in a child abuse court hearing. She attended CASA events, where she heard the difference CASA volunteers made in the lives of children—sometimes her patients—and wanted to be a part of it.

Kristen is the mom of triplet boys, and most of her energy and finances go to their preservation. In her free time, Kristen can be found on a tennis court, on a golf course, biking, hiking, laughing with her friends, or with her nose in a book.

MAY TRAINING

CASA of Kent County is looking for dedicated community members to join our May 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 May training class.



For 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
casakentco@kentcountymi.gov
616.632.5311

DONOR SPOTLIGHT

Kathy Mullen



Kathy’s journey as a supporter of CASA of Kent County has been a long and winding road.

Kathy has always had a heart for children and believes that “kids are the world’s most precious resource.” After her previous volunteer work with children in a variety of settings, CASA seemed like a natural fit. In 2016, Kathy went through training and became a court appointed special advocate. After serving on one case as a volunteer, Kathy began exploring other ways to support CASA. By 2018, Kathy and her husband, Pat, had become regular attendees at CASA events and were inviting their friends and family to join them.

Kathy also became increasingly committed to the idea of starting an **endowment fund** for CASA of Kent County. Recognizing the importance of stable and diverse funding sources, she reached out to the executive director to share her vision. After a delay courtesy of the COVID-19 pandemic, Kathy and then-board member Gerri Pasi collaborated to overcome obstacles and initiated the CASA of Kent County Endowment Fund at the Grand Rapids Community Foundation. Leading by example, Kathy and Pat laid the groundwork for sustainable funding by making an inaugural contribution to the fund.

Now a CASA board member and chair of the Endowment Committee, Kathy dedicates her time to planning for the future of the endowment fund by doing research and attending educational webinars. Kathy is paving the way for a strong endowment that will help support CASA for years to come.

When asked about how it feels to support CASA’s mission in this way, Kathy humbly responded that she’s just “a drop in the bucket” among many other faithful CASA supporters. She has “so much respect for the volunteers” and the work they do—just another reason Kathy supports CASA’s goal of long-term financial planning!

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

Bobbi Blanton



A friend introduced Bobbi to a child welfare program in Allegan County about 10 years ago.

Bobbi suspected Kent County, her home, must have a similar program and began researching. After a quick search, she discovered CASA of Kent County. She attended an information session and was struck by the reality of child abuse and neglect.

From her first introduction to CASA, Bobbi knew she wanted to be involved. In 2019, after careful consideration, Bobbi started taking steps to become a volunteer. During her many hours of CASA training, Bobbi gained a new perspective about the goal of the foster system: to reunify families whenever safely possible. Prior to her involvement with CASA, she wasn’t aware of the complexities that removing children from their home entails and how it always causes additional trauma.

After being sworn in as an officer of the court, Bobbi became an official CASA volunteer and chose her first case with two teen girls. That day, she received an intimidating, heavy, 2-inch-thick case file. Bobbi’s initial apprehension at taking on such a complicated case turned into determination. She knew she was facing a challenge but was willing to step up to the plate because these teens needed her advocacy.

Throughout her time as a CASA, Bobbi has been exposed to the heartache of the foster care and child welfare system. This motivated her to stay committed to her case. At first, gaining the trust of her CASA children was a challenging process, as it is for many volunteers who advocate for teens. It took time and patience but was well worth it. Along with gaining the trust of her girls, Bobbi has loved being a supportive person for young women who have previously lacked consistency in their lives. One of Bobbi’s most memorable moments as a CASA was watching one of her CASA children graduate from high school. Now that young woman is in college.

Having been the advocate for the two teens since 2020, Bobbi knows she made the right choice to become a court appointed special advocate. When asked what she would say to prospective CASA volunteers, Bobbi remarked that advocacy is hard, but also such an incredibly worthwhile and “rewarding experience.”

Thank you, Bobbi, for your commitment to the mission and vision of CASA.

WHAT IS AN ENDOWMENT FUND?

An endowment fund is a financial investment pool established by a nonprofit organization to generate income for the organization’s ongoing operations or specific purposes. The principal amount is generally kept intact, ensuring long-term sustainability.

If you’re interested in making a contribution to CASA of Kent County’s endowment fund, please contact Stephanie Sheler at stephanie.sheler@kentcountymi.gov or 616.632.5112.



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

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.

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.

Contact us

casa@kentcountymi.gov
casakentco.org
616.632.5311

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KENT COUNTY

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CASA CONNECT SPRING 2024

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