



Annual Report
Fiscal Year 2025

**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

casa@kentcountymi.gov
casakentco.org
616.632.5311

180 Ottawa Ave. NW, Suite 5200
Grand Rapids, MI 49503

Visit casakentco.org



A note from Executive Director Stephanie Sheler

I'm a quiet collector of quotes. When something captures the heart of our work at CASA of Kent County, I tuck it away.

Recently, our staff, volunteers, and board members participated in a training session led by Graci Harkema. She shared the story of her unexpected adoption and described her parents as people who had "more faith in her future than fear of her circumstances." I immediately pulled out my phone and typed that sentence into my notes. It has stayed with me because it captures the work of CASA.

Every day, we meet children and families immersed in a child welfare system that can feel overwhelming and uncertain. The circumstances are often complex, and there are real fears and unknowns. At the center of our mission, however, is a steady belief that a hopeful future is possible.

Our CASA volunteers, or Court Appointed Special Advocates, live that belief out in tangible ways. They build relationships rooted in consistency and trust. They gather information, recommend services, and provide thoughtful, fact-based reports to the judge. They ensure that a child's voice is heard and that their best interests remain central to every decision. They do this not because it is easy, but because they believe stability, safety, and permanence are worth working toward.

Volunteers are the front line of our mission, but they are not alone. Our board of directors provides strategic direction, fiduciary oversight, and wise counsel, holding the long view and positioning CASA of Kent County for thoughtful, sustainable growth.

Our donors and grant partners choose faith as well. Their generosity allows us to recruit, train, and support volunteers who stand beside children during some of the most pivotal moments of their lives. Their support translates directly into advocacy, presence, and voice.

We are also strengthened by a broader network of child welfare professionals, including foster care workers, judges, court-appointed attorneys, and community partners who share the conviction that a child's future can be brighter than their current circumstances.

To have more faith in a child's future than fear of their circumstances requires courage, action, and community. That community is you.

Because of you, CASA of Kent County walks alongside children until they find safe, stable, loving, permanent homes. Because of you, faith in what is possible becomes something real and measurable in the lives of children and families.

Thank you for being part of this work and for continuing to believe in the future.



Stephanie Sheler

Board Members

Tara Kiley
Chair
HR Strategist & Consultant
Freelance

Angie Mason-Maranda
Vice Chair
Assistant Clinical Director & Telehealth Therapist
Counseling Center of West Michigan

Derek Aten
Treasurer
Vice President
Lake Michigan Credit Union

Kevin Nelson
Secretary
Director of Donor Development
Heart of West Michigan United Way

Claire Guisfredi
Retired Nonprofit Executive Director

Chris Hickmann
Audit Partner
BDO USA, LLP

David Hodorowski
President
Allied Electric

Bill Holmes
Associate Director
Disability Advocates of Kent County

Kathy Mullen
Former CASA Volunteer

Leslie L. Neal, EdD
Professor of Communication
Montcalm Community College

Rachel Render
Executive Vice President for Advancement
Davenport University

Kristen Snyder, PA-C
Physician Assistant & Associate Chief
Medical Informatics Officer
Corewell Health

Amanda Witte
KSSN Team Lead
Kent School Services Network

Staff Members

Stephanie Sheler
Executive Director

Daliecea Conkle
Program Manager

Samantha Johnson
Development & Marketing Manager

Carrie Shoesmith
Administrative Manager

Leah Rettig
Advocacy Manager

Amanda Brader
Advocate Supervisor

Vivian Gaskin
Community Outreach Coordinator

Kaylee McElrath
Advocate Supervisor

Jeff Stob
Advocate Supervisor

Maya Sutton-Jackson
Advocate Supervisor

CASA Children and Teens

During fiscal year 2025, 593 children in Kent County lived in foster care after experiencing abuse or neglect at home. Many of these children carried deep trauma and uncertainty. Judges, attorneys, foster care professionals, or foster parents recognized their need for additional advocacy and referred them to CASA.

Among these referrals were two toddlers whose parents were unable to maintain a clean, safe home due to struggles with addiction, a group of young siblings who were left alone for several days straight while their mother was in jail, and a teen girl who experienced physical and medical neglect.

Even within an overburdened child welfare system, these children were not alone. They each had the steady presence of a Court Appointed Special Advocate by their side to speak up for their needs and guide them toward a safer, more stable future.

176

Children served

53% male

47% female

53

Closed cases

2025 Financials

FY25 Revenue

\$1,187,841

- 22% Court
- 21% Foundations & Grants
- 48% Donations
- 9% Other

Total revenue includes multiyear pledges recognized in accordance with accounting standards. Cash will be received in future years.

The total pledges recognized during FY25 is \$324,659.

FY25 Expenses

\$740,063

- 61% Program
- 22% Management
- 17% Fundraising

Donors

384 35

Individuals/
Households

Businesses

8 6

Foundations

Court/Churches/
Nonprofits

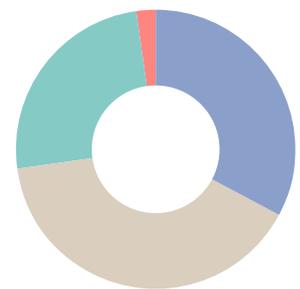
FY25 Endowment Contributions

\$5,500

FY25 Endowment Balance

Ending 9/30/2025

\$227,468



Age

- 33% 0 – 5 years
- 40% 6 – 12 years
- 25% 13 – 18 years
- 2% 19 – 21 years

Race

- 49% Caucasian
- 35% African American
- 7% Hispanic
- 5% Multiracial
- 2% Native American
- 2% Unknown



“These kids are going to be in our shoes [someday], making important decisions, leading important lives. So how do we set them up to be successful?”

Holly Goad, CASA volunteer

CASA Volunteers

CASA volunteers consistently demonstrate extraordinary commitment to children in foster care. The CASA volunteer journey begins with a thorough application and interview process, followed by 30 hours of specialized training provided by the CASA staff. After completing training, each volunteer is formally sworn in as an officer of the court by a 17th Circuit Court Family Division judge. From there, CASA volunteers select a case and are matched with a case supporting a child or sibling group. Volunteers commit to seeing their CASA case through to permanency, often advocating for up to three years until children are in a safe permanent home.

The folks who step into this role come from all walks of life but share a common desire to make a meaningful difference for children in the Kent County community. During fiscal year 2025, CASA volunteers represented a wide range of personal and professional backgrounds. Some balanced the role with full-time jobs; others were retired. Many began their advocacy without having any prior child welfare knowledge. Together, their varied perspectives strengthen the program and help ensure that every child is supported by a compassionate, caring advocate.

104

Active volunteers

81% female
19% male

25

Newly trained volunteers

Race

94% Caucasian
3% African American
1% Multiracial
1% Hispanic
1% Asian

Years of service

9.5% <1 year
60% 2 – 3 years
11.5% 4 – 5 years
9.5% 6 – 9 years
9.5% 10+ years

CASA Outcomes



32%
Adopted

25%
Reunified with parents

11%
Placed in guardianship

11%
Aged out

11%
CASA services no longer needed

9%
CASA volunteer did not fulfill commitment

When children are removed from their parents due to abuse or neglect, the family enters a complex child welfare system. During fiscal year 2025, CASA volunteers collaborated with a team of dedicated professionals—including judges, attorneys, and social workers—to ensure the well-being of these children and support their families.

Whenever it can be done safely, reuniting children with their parents is the goal of the system. If returning home is not possible, other permanent solutions, such as adoption or guardianship, are pursued. Unfortunately, older teens sometimes “age out” of the system, never finding a permanent home. In other instances, CASA may withdraw before a court case officially ends if the volunteer is deemed unnecessary by all parties or if the volunteer does not fulfill their commitment to stay for the duration of the court case.

In fiscal year 2025, CASA of Kent County closed the cases of 53 children who had a dedicated advocate, reflecting meaningful progress in our mission to advocate for and support vulnerable children in our community.

“CASA makes it possible for good-hearted people to do more than wish for a better world—it empowers them to make a tangible, life-changing difference for kids who are going through the hardest time of their lives.”

Senator Winnie Brinks,
MI 29th District

Looking ahead
SAVE THE DATE | 2026 EVENTS
Annual Luncheon April 23
Heart of CASA October 8

Featured Partnership

Meghan & Gabriel

Children in crisis

Gabriel was only five when his youngest brother was born in 2023. His mother had been struggling with her mental health and turned to illegal substances to numb some of the pain she was feeling. When the newborn baby tested positive for methamphetamine at the hospital, Child Protective Services immediately removed the three children—Gabriel and his two brothers—from their mother’s care. At that time, Gabriel’s father was in jail serving a nine-month sentence. With neither of his parents able to provide the safe, loving home he needed, Gabriel went to live with his paternal aunt. His siblings, whose fathers were unknown, were placed in nonrelative foster care.

CASA gets involved

Due to the trauma Gabriel had already experienced during his young life, he struggled to manage his emotions at home and school. During disagreements with classmates, Gabriel often broke down— growling, screaming, and storming out of his classroom. The emotions built up and made it difficult for him to focus or have calm conversations. Several months into Gabriel’s placement with his aunt, CASA volunteer Meghan joined the case to provide additional advocacy for Gabriel and his brothers.

Although Gabriel was too young to fully understand Meghan’s role as a CASA volunteer, he quickly learned that she was a trustworthy adult—someone who showed up every week. Together, they visited parks and museums. Meghan prioritized learning about Gabriel’s well-being and reserving time for him just to have fun and be a kid.

Meghan began making recommendations to support Gabriel and his siblings. She advocated for the children to receive occupational therapy and for Gabriel to be evaluated for an individual education program to support his learning due to his behavioral struggles and ADHD.

Progress and setbacks

Gabriel’s mother struggled to make consistent progress in her parenting plan. Her substance use screening results were varied, and she was unable to maintain sobriety for more than a couple of months at a time. She often canceled or rescheduled visits, causing significant emotional distress to Gabriel and his brothers. Meghan recognized this strain on the children’s emotional well-being. She gathered information from the children’s foster parents and teachers, noting that for the older children, behavioral meltdowns often coincided with visits or cancellations.

Continued on the next page.

Featured Partnership

Meghan & Gabriel

Meanwhile, Gabriel's father completed his sentence and began working through his parenting plan, following the steps set forth by the foster care agency. He was consistent in attending counseling sessions, engaging in anger management treatment, and following the terms of his probation. He'd found full-time employment and a new apartment. During parenting visits with Gabriel, his father was enthusiastic and engaged. Meghan advocated for Gabriel to spend more time with his dad. Soon, their visits became longer and more frequent.

Father and son

It became clear to the judge that Gabriel's father had turned his life around, creating a safe, loving, stable home for his son. They began having overnight visits. Gabriel was ecstatic for them to spend even more time together, and especially enjoyed decorating his new room at this father's apartment. Plans were made for Gabriel and his father to officially reunify. Gabriel shared his excitement with Meghan, which she reported to the judge during her final hearing as his CASA volunteer: "I have fun with my dad. I go on lots of walks with him, and always eat good food. My dad takes really good care of me."

The advocacy continues

The situation was bittersweet for Meghan. As Gabriel experienced the joy of full reunification with his father, his younger brothers remained in foster care, their futures uncertain. Gabriel no longer requires the extra support of a CASA volunteer now that he's home safe with his father. Yet Meghan's advocacy continues for Gabriel's younger brothers. She'll remain their advocate until they also receive what they deserve: a safe, loving, permanent home and the opportunity to thrive.



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 via 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.

