

CASA CONNECT

A VOICE FOR HAYDEN

Fifteen-year-old Hayden's life has been turned upside down. After a severe accident left him with a traumatic brain injury and several other physical disabilities, his parents struggled to provide him with adequate care. Eventually, authorities intervened, and Hayden was removed from his parents' custody on grounds of medical neglect.

Hayden lost his physical independence, his home, his family, and everyone he knew. Now, Hayden is navigating new medical needs and a new school with a foster family he just met. The judge immediately identified Hayden's case as an opportunity for additional advocacy and requested that a CASA volunteer be appointed. Enter Tanya.

Tanya is still getting to know Hayden, but she can see he is a bright young man who is committed to his own recovery. Tanya has spent time with Hayden weekly over the past few months, observing his medical appointments and parenting visits. Tanya visits Hayden in his foster home to check on his well-being and engages in nonverbal communication with him. Because Hayden's disabilities limit conversation with the professionals in his life, the time Tanya spends with him is especially important in reports to the judge.

There is still a long way to go in Hayden's recovery journey. He will continue to require significant support from the adults in his life. But now, with Tanya by his side, there will be someone to ensure that proper progress is made each step of the way.

OUTCOMES UPDATE

October – December 2025

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.

16	Requests for a CASA volunteer
133	Children served
78	Assigned volunteers
70	Court reports written
8	Newly trained volunteers
20	Children achieved permanency



CHRIS HICKMANN

**Audit Partner
BDO USA, LLP**

Chris is a CPA and audit partner. He began his career in Grand Rapids, Michigan, before transferring to Deloitte's Tri-State in Connecticut. In 2019, Chris returned to Michigan and now serves as an audit partner at BDO.

Throughout his life, Chris has developed a passion for serving at-risk youth. While living in Connecticut he joined the board of Boys and Girls Village, where he served for 12 years. Chris gained significant board experience, seeing the organization through many changes in programs and management. Upon moving back to Michigan, he wanted to get involved with an organization that serves his community's youth. Chris is excited and honored to join the CASA of Kent County board.

Chris enjoys outdoor activities: hiking and biking in the summer, snowmobiling in the winter. He is the proud father of one son and two daughters, the youngest of whom was adopted from Saint Petersburg, Russia.



DAVID HODOROWSKI

**President
Allied Electric**

Current president of Allied Electric, David has more than a decade of accounting experience. During his career, he has held a variety of roles, including audit manager at KMPG and financial reporting manager at Rev Group, where he had the opportunity to support a team making custom Spartan-branded fire trucks.

David was drawn to CASA of Kent County's board of directors because he wants to make an impact in his community. He volunteers his time as a board member to impact local children's lives for the better.

In his personal time, David enjoys spending time with his wife and two children. Together, his family especially appreciates hiking and fishing.



RACHEL RENDER

**Executive Vice President for Advancement
Davenport University**

Rachel Render is executive vice president for advancement at Davenport University, where she leads philanthropy, alumni engagement, and sponsored programs to advance the university's mission and impact. She brings more than 20 years of leadership and fundraising experience in higher education, having served at the University of Colorado Boulder, Rice University, and the University of Michigan. Rachel holds a degree in business administration from Central Michigan University.

Outside her professional work, Rachel and her husband, Devin, discovered their passion for CASA while serving as Court Appointed Special Advocates in Houston, Texas. After returning home to Michigan, they were eager to reengage with CASA and continue supporting its vital work. Rachel and Devin are the proud parents of two boys, aged 10 and 8.



LESLIE NEAL

**Professor of Communication
Montcalm Community College**

Leslie Neal started her postsecondary teaching career at Grand Rapids Community College in 2010 as an adjunct instructor for the college's Language and Thought department. She currently works as a full-time instructor and department chair of Communication and Speech for Montcalm Community College. However, she still teaches a class or two at GRCC from time to time and even serves as an equity fellow in the college's Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

Dr. Neal grew up in Detroit, Michigan, but moved to the west side of the state to receive both her Bachelor of Science and Master of Science in communication studies from Grand Valley State University. She also spent time studying international communication in London, England. She completed a doctoral degree at Ferris State University in educational leadership.

After learning about the work and mission of CASA of Kent County, it was easy for Leslie to say yes to an organization that works to bring a voice to children. Serving on the board provides an opportunity to lend her expertise to an organization that is creating an intentional space for children and encouraging civic engagement from adults.

In her time away from the classroom, Leslie and her spouse find delight in raising their two children in the greater Grand Rapids area. During school breaks, they travel wherever the wind blows, allowing them to broaden their world view. Currently, Dr. Neal has traveled out of the country over 20 times, with her favorite visited country being Kenya.

A NOTE FROM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR STEPHANIE SHELER



I have a small, handwritten sign in my office that says, "Be the Buffalo."

The other day when my nephew stopped by, he pointed to it and asked what it meant. I had to think for a moment—because it's a simple phrase that carries a lot of weight.

Here's how I explained it.

When buffalo sense a storm coming, they don't turn away from it. They turn toward it and move straight through. By facing the storm head-on, they spend less time in the wind and rain and get through it more quickly.

That idea has stayed with me—not as a fun fact about animals, but as a way of understanding hard things in life.

When I think about children and families impacted by abuse and neglect, "storm" feels like exactly the right word. The child welfare system is overwhelming, unpredictable, and frightening. And for these children, the storm is already here. The only way out is through.

But going through a storm alone is awful. It's isolating. It's confusing. It's dealing with adult decisions you didn't choose, without the tools or power to make sense of them. No child should have to do that by themselves.

That's where CASA of Kent County comes in.

Our volunteer advocates walk alongside children as they move through the storm. They make sure each child's voice is heard in a system that can otherwise feel overwhelming.

You can be part of this too.

By volunteering, giving, or simply sharing our mission, you help ensure that children in our community don't have to face the storm alone. You help shorten the distance between fear and safety, between uncertainty and stability.

Sometimes the most important thing we can do is turn toward the storm and walk through it with someone else.

Thank you for being part of this work.



Stephanie Sheler
Executive Director

THE FACES OF CASA: MEET OUR NEW BOARD MEMBERS

DONOR SPOTLIGHT

GREATER GRAND RAPIDS 100 WOMEN WHO CARE



Kate Cour from Match Frame Creative first learned about CASA of Kent County when her workplace hosted a meet-and-greet where Development & Marketing Manager Sam Johnson spoke about CASA's mission. "The stats shared with our team regarding the number of children in Kent County that go without a Court Appointed Special Advocate were alarming. Every child needs a voice and an advocate," says Kate. She saw the opportunity to help spread the word about CASA's mission through her membership in the Greater Grand Rapids 100 Women Who Care (100 WWC) group. Kate thought, "Perhaps this group of women could be a catalyst in getting the word out about the need for more [CASA] volunteers."

The concept of the 100 WWC group is for 100+ civically engaged women to gather quarterly to support community organizations via individual \$100 donations. Members nominate local charities for consideration at each meeting, and representatives of said charities present a case for support. Members then vote on a charity recipient to fund collectively.

Kate joined the Greater Grand Rapids 100 WWC in 2016, shortly after the group was established, but took a break when her children were young and rejoined in 2025. Kate shared, "I have always valued serving others and supporting my community. As a full-time working mom, I don't always have the time I would like to volunteer, but 100 WWC provides a meaningful way for me to give back to the community financially." The group also gives Kate the opportunity to learn about nonprofit organizations in her community.

Following Executive Director Stephanie Sheler's presentation, the 100 WWC group chose CASA as the funding recipient. Stephanie's passion for and knowledge of child welfare shone through in her pitch. According to Kate, CASA also made sense for 100 WWC to fund. She said, "I believe the typical 100 WWC is passionate about making a difference in our community—especially when it comes to advocating for vulnerable populations who need a voice, such as the children in the Kent County foster care system."

Thanks to Kate and the 100 WWC members, dozens more community members now know about CASA's work and there is vital funding to continue growing our mission!



We're excited to present CASA Connections, a program of regular engagement and learning opportunities for CASA volunteers. We kicked things off with a CASA Connections Gathering at Mitten Brewing Company and an in-service training with Graci Harkema.

We can't wait to share what's next!

Volunteers, please keep an eye on your email inboxes for future event invitations and information. We look forward to seeing you soon!



ripple effect

CASA of Kent County Annual Luncheon 2026

Join us for our 2026 Annual Luncheon!

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 foster care.

Bring a friend and join us for lunch to learn how you can cause your own ripple effect by supporting CASA—whether by raising awareness, becoming a volunteer, or making a donation. Together, we can create an impact that turns the tide for children and families in Kent County!

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

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

Thursday, April 23

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.

KRISTI HARPER

CASA volunteer since 2024



Why did you decide to become a CASA volunteer?

I decided to become a CASA volunteer because some children in the foster care system need extra advocacy. Every child deserves to live a happy and healthy life, and it is my honor to walk alongside them and their families to ensure their needs are taken care of.

What is something that you learned during CASA training?

I think one of the biggest takeaways from CASA training is the importance of cultural competency. A CASA volunteer may work with a child/family that looks different from them. It is important to take the time to get to know your child well, which includes an educated understanding of their culture. That understanding will allow you to be their best advocate.

What is something that you've learned or realized while being a CASA volunteer?

I have learned the importance of good communication. Knowing what questions to ask as well as being an active listener. When you establish a relationship with your CASA child(ren), you develop trust with them as well as with their caregivers and family.

What is it like being a co-CASA for a large group of siblings?

Being a co-CASA allows a volunteer to have a partner to discuss the case with. It allows you to bounce ideas off each other, as well as offering different perspectives on a situation. The sibling group that I am currently working with has five children. Co-CASA partnership allows us to spend time with all the children at our visits, which would be very difficult for one volunteer. We work as a team and divide case notes and report writing, which is so helpful.

What is your favorite part about being a CASA volunteer?

I think my favorite part about being a CASA is knowing that I am making a positive impact on a child's life. Building those relationships is so important. I want them to understand that I am a safe adult, and I am honored to play a part in their story.

What would you say to someone who is considering becoming a CASA volunteer?

If you have it in your heart to become a CASA, go to an informational meeting or reach out for more information. CASA supervisors and staff are available to answer questions and assist as needed. The time commitment is truly minimal; many volunteers also hold full-time jobs. In my opinion, the relationships that you build and the impact that you can provide are immeasurable.

Is there anything else you'd like to share?

In addition to being a CASA volunteer, I am also a handler with West Michigan Therapy Dogs. This past December, I organized a group of therapy dogs to attend the CASA holiday party. The dogs were a hit and helped spread some love and kisses with the kids and families, as well as volunteers and CASA staff. Therapy dogs have been proven to reduce stress as well as offer comfort during stressful situations. They were a bonus to the evening's activities!



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.

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.

Partners

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

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

casakentco.org
casakentco.org
616.632.5311

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Advocate Supervisor





KENT COUNTY

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CASA CONNECT SPRING 2026

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