



CASA CONNECT

SUMMER
2026

AFFIRMING ADVOCACY

Noah was just fifteen years old when an increasingly tumultuous relationship with his parents escalated. Eventually, they permanently kicked him out of their home. With nowhere to go and nobody to turn to, he spiraled into a mental health crisis and had to be admitted to the hospital before eventually being placed in a foster home.

After Noah moved into a foster care placement, CASA volunteer Jenny stepped into the picture. Noah's repeated failed attempts to contact his parents made it clear that reunification was an unlikely outcome. Jenny instead focused on helping Noah build stability and independence as he approached adulthood, making recommendations in court to help him get there.

From the beginning, Jenny advocated for LGBTQIA+ affirming therapy for Noah. His identity was a source of conflict in his relationship with his parents, and she recognized his need for a supportive, affirming presence. Jenny also recognized that Noah had fallen far behind in school and advocated for him to shift to earning a GED.

Noah's journey since entering foster care has been far from easy. He navigated multiple placement changes, hospital visits, and the death of his uncle with whom he had stayed in touch since entering foster care. Despite the many hardships in Noah's life, Jenny sees the kindhearted, creative child underneath all the pain and loss.

With the support of Jenny's advocacy, Noah has made significant steps toward healing and independence as he approaches adulthood. He has been working on earning his GED, attending therapy regularly, spending time with friends, and even playing guitar again—a hobby he had abandoned after being kicked out by his parents.

While Noah is still navigating challenges with mental health and adjusting to the ways his life has changed, he knows that he doesn't have to face these challenges alone. Jenny has made it clear to Noah that he deserves safety, support, and acceptance.

OUTCOMES UPDATE

January 1 – March 31, 2026

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.

10	Requests for a CASA volunteer
138	Children served
91	Assigned volunteers
73	Court reports written
8	Newly trained volunteers
11	Children achieved permanency

A NOTE FROM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR STEPHANIE SHELER

Growing up, I was very close to my cousin Stacey. We were only a few years apart, and we saw each other almost weekly. Stacey lived on one side of a duplex, and my grandparents lived on the other. So, during my family's regular visits to my grandparents' house, I almost always ended up playing with Stacey.

Years later, when we were both married with young children of our own, we still found ways to stay connected. During the summer, we would often meet at Holland State Park with our kids. Those beach days became our chance to catch up on life and talk about everything that had happened over the past year.

To be honest, our children didn't always appreciate those conversations. In fact, Stacey's kids jokingly referred to them as "spreading the word"—and not in a good way. Stacey and I would just laugh. After all, our children were in elementary school, and there really wasn't that much to spread the word about.

But over the years, I've come to think differently about that phrase.

Some things should be spread by word of mouth.

At CASA of Kent County, we need people willing to spread the word about children in foster care, about the need for advocates, and about the difference one caring adult can make in a child's life.

In fact, most people who inquire about becoming a CASA volunteer first learned about CASA because someone in their life invited them to an event, encouraged them to visit our website, or simply said the powerful words "You would make a great CASA volunteer."

Those simple conversations matter more than you may realize. Every time you talk about CASA, share your experience, invite someone to learn more, or encourage another person to get involved, you are helping children in foster care move one step closer to having a voice.

Many of the volunteers, donors, and supporters who are part of CASA today are here because someone else was willing to spread the word.

So, thank you for continuing to tell CASA's story. Thank you for inviting others into this mission. And thank you for helping us spread the word.



Stephanie Sheler
Executive Director

CASA AROUND TOWN



Spreading the word about CASA's mission is key to helping children in Kent County foster care receive the best-interest advocacy they deserve. The CASA of Kent County team regularly presents to local organizations and attends community events. We love to connect with other groups making a difference in our community and, in turn, share how our advocates are impacting children and families for the better.

Recently, our team had the opportunity to connect with the community at events, including:

- Heart of West Michigan United Way's Celebrate United Event
- CASA Day at the Capitol hosted by Michigan CASA
- Our Mental Health Collective's Healing Together Fair
- Michigan CASA's It Takes All of Us Gala
- A lunch and learn with BDO
- Grand Rapids Asian-Pacific Festival

These engagements allow us to raise awareness, recruit new volunteers, and build relationships with local partners who are passionate about supporting the Kent County community. We love meeting new people and sharing the impact that CASA volunteers have every day!

Do you want to raise awareness about CASA's work?

Invite us to your workplace, church, book club, or community event!

Contact our team at casa@kentcountymi.gov to learn more.



VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT



Molly Merillat

Molly Merillat had hit a boiling point watching current events unfold in the news. Molly saw troubling things happening around the world and decided she wanted to quit doomscrolling and instead find a way to get involved in her local community.

After internet searching "Grand Rapids volunteer opportunities," she found CASA of Kent County.

The role of a CASA volunteer aligned well with Molly's passion for learning about post-traumatic stress disorder and supporting folks who have experienced trauma. Molly confided that she is the product of a stable and loving home with a big support system. However, after she was assaulted during college, Molly felt like the rug was ripped out from under her. Thanks to her loved ones and trauma-informed therapy, Molly has since regained her footing. Now, Molly has made it her mission to uplift folks who are struggling with similar situations. CASA was the perfect fit.

When Molly underwent CASA training, two things stuck out to her: the turnover rate of foster care caseworkers and the likelihood that teens in foster care will turn 18 without a forever family or age out of the system. Both unfortunate trends reflect gaps in the overwhelmed child welfare system—gaps that the CASA program strives to fill through advocacy.

On Molly's current case, she advocates for two siblings, ages five and six. She has learned that much of advocacy involves just being present for the children. To establish rapport, Molly asks questions

and affirms their feelings by repeating statements back to them. Molly helps ensure that her CASA children have all the resources they need to be successful, and she advocates for support when she notices gaps. Molly pushed for the children to return to their hometown after being placed in a different foster home far from everything they knew. She has also formed a close working relationship with the children's relative caregiver.

Ultimately, Molly's advocacy goal is to reflect the support she received as a child onto her CASA children. Whether that means eating lunch together, picking them up from school, or ensuring that they have a special birthday treat, Molly is looking out for her CASA children.

When asked what she might say to someone who is considering becoming a CASA volunteer, Molly stated, "Just do it! Jump in. I'd challenge anyone who doesn't know if they have the time to take a look at their screen time and see if they have 15 hours a month to give up. That's what worked for me." Molly does not see volunteering as a sacrifice but as something simple she can do to give back. In Molly's words, "Children in foster care are a vulnerable population. If you can help a kid, why not? Be a comfort. That's enough."

"Children in foster care are a vulnerable population. If you can help a kid, why not? Be a comfort. That's enough."

ripple effect

CASA of Kent County Annual Luncheon 2026

One can expect when attending a CASA of Kent County event that the theme will be woven throughout the event. From program messaging to décor to music, the CASA team will surely remind you of the neat metaphor that brought you together with other guests to support children and families in Kent County. This year's theme, Ripple Effect, was no exception.

The sentiment echoed throughout the event space: It only takes one person—just a drop in the ocean—to make waves. A conversation with a friend. An encouraging text message. A LinkedIn post. Any of these small actions could cause a ripple effect that changes a child's life for the better.

During the event, guests enjoyed an exhibit from student artists from Catholic Central High School that highlighted the individual impact that ripples can make. The program also featured powerful messages from key voices in the CASA community. Referee Peter Kulas-Dominguez spoke of the vital impact of CASA volunteers that he sees in the courtroom. CASA volunteer Chad Kirkpatrick shared his experience advocating for two siblings over the past three years.

Executive Director Stephanie Sheler concluded the event by calling on guests to begin creating their own ripple effect through volunteering, donating, or spreading the word. The event illustrated how the power of one individual can grow into a movement with the support of the community. Together, we can ensure that children and families receive the support they need.

354

Total attendees

27

Guests interested in volunteering

89

New donors

201

Total individual/household and corporate donors

\$88,729

Amount raised

Thank you, sponsors!

The Jeff & Cheryl Baker Family Foundation – Presenting Sponsor

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Blackwell Insurance Services

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West Michigan Community Bank

Bear Sign

Save the date for Heart of CASA

Thursday, October 8, 2026

The High Five GR



1. Guests enjoy the Ripple Effect program. (Photo credit: Charla Dee)
2. Referee Peter Kulas-Dominguez speaks about the impact of CASA volunteers in the courtroom. (Photo credit: Charla Dee)
3. Table host Kevin Nelson and his guests gather for lunch. (Photo credit: Charla Dee)
- 4-6. Guests pose with a custom photo backdrop created by CASA volunteer Gail VanderLaan. (Photo credit: Wildcrest Studio)
7. Guests stop for a photo while viewing art from Catholic Central High School students. (Photo credit: Charla Dee)



Catching up

This quarter, we brought you our inaugural CASA Reads book club meeting, where CASA volunteers read and discussed *Educated* by Tara Westover. The discussion focused on Westover's personal story and the themes of education access, complex family dynamics, and support systems. CASA volunteers and staff unpacked the content of the book together over a Zoom call.

Additionally, advocates gathered for our first virtual CASA Connections gathering. This was an opportunity for volunteers to connect, share their current wins and challenges, exchange advice, and receive support from each other and the CASA staff. One attendee shared, "The opportunity to connect with other volunteers was invaluable. They understand firsthand the best and hardest parts of CASA advocacy, and even as we were able to share some of the difficult things we were each navigating, I walked away with encouragements and the reminder that we're all in this together to advocate for these kids."

Looking ahead

We're excited to continue hosting future opportunities for continuing education and connection. Volunteers, please keep an eye on your email inboxes and save the date for these upcoming events!

COURT REPORT WRITING TIPS & BEST PRACTICES

Strengthen your confidence and sharpen your skills so your reports are not only complete but also truly impactful and court-ready.

Monday, June 22 | 5:30–7:00 PM | Zoom

2 Continued Education Training Credits

RSVP to Leah Rettig: leah.rettig@kentcountymi.gov

MEN AT THE MITTEN

A chance for all current and prospective male CASA volunteers to connect. Join us and bring a friend who would make a great CASA!

Wednesday, June 24 | 5:00–7:00 PM

Mitten Brewing Company

RSVP using the QR code.



VOLUNTEER CELEBRATION NIGHT

Volunteers, we're excited to celebrate you! More details are coming soon.

Tuesday, August 11 | 6:00–8:00 PM

Ivanrest Church

DONOR SPOTLIGHT



Plante Moran

Did you know that international accounting firm Plante Moran supports community organizations near its local offices? Plante Moran Cares (PM Cares) is a firm-wide initiative executed at the local level.

Every year, through open nominations and voting, each office selects an organization to support. Staff members can submit local organizations for consideration—ideally those that PM Cares can support in a variety of ways: volunteering, donating, and spreading the word.

In summer 2025, CASA of Kent County was nominated by multiple staff members from the Grand Rapids office for various reasons—one staff member, Molly Merillat (this quarter’s Volunteer Spotlight) is a volunteer; one is related to a board member; and others had simply heard about CASA’s work through friends and family.

Guided by their “We Care” philosophy, the Grand Rapids office chose CASA of Kent County as their partner organization for fiscal year 2026. The PM Cares team shared, “Supporting CASA has given us the opportunity to learn more about the issues in our community and the importance of advocacy, stability, and support for children navigating complex systems. The children in our community will ultimately become the adults in our community. Our partnership with CASA made visible pathways for staff to provide long-term, community-based impact—not just one-time financial giving.”

Grand Rapids Plante Moran team members have supported CASA through individual giving, attending events, and by helping spread the word about our work. Some team members even attended the CASA child/volunteer holiday party in December, helping facilitate fun activities for children to enjoy! The variety of engagement opportunities has given the Plante Moran staff the option to support CASA “in a way that feels authentic for them” and aligns with each individual’s philanthropic goals.

The PM Cares team said, “Supporting an organization like CASA has given our staff a meaningful way to get involved and make a local impact. It reminds us all that even small contributions can make a difference in a child’s life.”

“Supporting CASA has given us the opportunity to learn more about the issues in our community and the importance of advocacy, stability, and support for children navigating complex systems.”



EVERY CHILD HAS A STORY. HELP THEM SPEAK UP.



BE THEIR VOICE.



Scan with your phone or visit tiny.cc/BeTheirVoice.

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

casa@kentcountymi.gov
casakentco.org
616.632.5311

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KENT COUNTY

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CASA CONNECT SUMMER 2026

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