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Testimony before the Senate Committee on Senate Mental Health and Substance Abuse

State Senator André Jacque

May 3, 2023

Chairman James and Committee Members:

Thank you for holding this hearing and for the opportunity to testify before you today in support of Senate Bill 128, which would expand the Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program in Wisconsin.

Court Appointed Special Advocates are a stabilizing force in a child's life. Under the existing Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program [Wis. Stat. 48.236 & 48.07(5), enacted in 1999], a CASA volunteer is a trained individual who is appointed by the children's court in a proceeding relating to a child who is alleged to be in need of protection or services (CHIPS).

The CASA's role is to gather information and make observations about the child and the child's family environment, make regular, typically weekly contact with the child, monitor the family's compliance with the permanency plan and any court orders and any agency's provision of necessary services, promote the best interest of the child, and provide written information about these observations to the court.

Trained Advocates are sworn officers of the court, reporting to the judge who oversees the child's case. Created by a judge for judges, CASAs increase the amount of information judges receive with independent observations and serve as the "eyes and ears of the court". Currently, the Wisconsin Court Appointed Special Advocate Association coordinates CASA programs in 13 counties and is part of a national network of nearly 1,000 state and local programs.

A CASA advocate meets with the child until their case is closed. CASA works; studies show that children with a CASA do better in school and spend less time in the child welfare system, and an advocate's consistent presence leaves a positive, lasting impact on the child.

CASAs also enhance the effectiveness of safe and permanent homes for children in Wisconsin, with a significant cost savings to the child welfare system of approximately \$2,200 per child annually, while reducing time out of home by 1.8 months, fewer placement changes, and a lower re-entry rate. CASA's are mandated reporters and help ensure children's safety, addressing issues before they become a crisis.

This bill allocates \$6.8 million of additional state funds over the next two years to clear the backlog and expand the existing CASA program to serve all eligible children in existing local CASA programs, and to create two new CASA county programs in 2023 and two new CASA county programs in 2024. There are currently seven counties ready and waiting for a CASA program: Racine, Marathon, Langlade, Trempealeau, Waupaca, Winnebago, and Sawyer.

Thank you for your consideration of Senate Bill 128. I'd be happy to answer any questions.



PATRICK SNYDER

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 85th ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 128

Senate Committee on Mental Health, Substance Abuse Prevention, Children and Families
May 3rd, 2023

Chairman James and Members of the Committee:

I authored this legislation with Senator Jacque because I know just how impactful a Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) can be for a child. Currently, the Wisconsin Court Appointed Special Advocate Association coordinates CASA programs in 13 counties and is part of a national network. Senate Bill 128 would expand the program so it serves all eligible children in existing local CASA programs and create four new county programs by the end of 2024.

CASA programs use citizen volunteers to advocate on behalf of a child when appointed by the court overseeing a Child in Need of Protection and/or Services (CHIPS) case. These trained volunteers gather information through regular face-to-face visits with the child and make independent observations about the child and the child's environment to ensure compliance with the permanency plan, court orders, and to establish what additional services a child in a CHIPS proceeding may need.

The importance of a CASA during this complicated and traumatic process to act on behalf of the child can simply not be overstated. A CASA builds a relationship with the child and comes to know the needs and experiences of the child to advocate on their behalf – allowing a judge to more effectively make a decision that reflects the best interests of the child.

Expanding the CASA program in Wisconsin will only lead to better outcomes for children most in need.

Thank you for taking the time to hear my testimony today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Testimony for the Senate Committee on Mental Health, Substance Abuse Prevention, & Children and Families

5/3/2023

Bonnie MacRitchie

Thank you, Chair James, and thank you to the committee for the opportunity to share today. My name is Bonnie MacRitchie and I serve on the Canopy Center Board of Directors, the umbrella agency for Dane County CASA. In a former role, I worked for Dane County CASA as the Program Coordinator which means I recruited community volunteers, trained them to become advocates and supervised them as they took on their assigned cases. I built relationships with judges, social workers, attorneys, birth and foster parents. I can tell you the individuals who serve as CASA volunteers are some of the most **Self-less** individuals I have met. Each week they visit their assigned child or sibling group where ever they are living and follow them through all of their transitions.

As the Program Coordinator, I had the opportunity to serve on a case myself – visiting my little guy first at his foster home, then at his Mom's, and finally at his Dad's. He was six when I first met him and the first time I visited him at his mom's, after visiting at his foster family's home for months, he was so surprised to see me, he shouted through the screen door, "Bonnie! How did you find me here?!" I developed a relationship with his teacher when I began visiting him at his school during a time when he and his mom were living at a domestic violence shelter. His teacher let me know that he had untreated eczema that was so itchy he couldn't pay attention in class. Understandably, his mom had a lot going on at the time, but I was able to communicate that to the social worker and we were able to get him the cream he needed.

One of my favorite stories from my time as Program Coordinator is when a CASA volunteer developed a relationship with a barber who worked out of his home in a small town. Her CASA child desperately needed a haircut and was being bullied in school. The volunteer noticed the sign in the window of the barber's home within walking distance from the CASA child's home. She called the barber one day asking if he might consider providing this child a haircut and he agreed. He also agreed to continue cutting his hair whenever he needed it.

CASA volunteers also provide judges a valuable service through their monthly reports and testimony in court. In one case I will never forget, a young law student CASA volunteer made the difference between the children being removed from their home and being able to continue living with their mother. The CASA volunteer agreed to visit three times a week to allow the social worker time to help mom stabilize her home while ensuring the children were being cared for, preventing additional trauma for the children and reliance on additional resources of the child welfare system.

The CASA program is also a great bargain! For every 1 staff case coordinator there can be up to 30 volunteers serving families; providing that individualized attention every child welfare professional wishes they could provide.

Thank you, Chair James and committee members, very much for your consideration of this impactful legislation.



May 3, 2023

Mental Health, Substance Abuse Prevention and Children and Families Senate Committee

Christy Keele -

Good afternoon, Members of the Mental Health, Substance Abuse Prevention and Children and Families Senate Committee. My name is Christy Keele, and I am here today to voice my support for Senate Bill 128, which would increase the appropriations funding from the State of Wisconsin to the Wisconsin CASA organization.

I have a bit of a unique perspective to share with you today. I am an attorney. I am a Guardian ad Litem. And I've represented kids in care and protection cases for over 15 years. As a GAL, my role has been to represent the best interests of children and to assist the court in making custody, placement, and support decisions.

I have worked in a county without a CASA program, where I was the only attorney dedicating 100% of my practice to representing children placed in foster care. At times, I would have 75-100 children on my caseload. There is no way you can possibly meet with all of them on a regular basis. You do your very best, but there is not enough time to establish a relationship or rapport with each child.

Being in a county where there is a CASA program makes all the difference in the world. When children have regular, weekly contact with an adult that they know cares about them, an adult that isn't going to leave them, it creates incredible trust.

They trust that their wishes will be shared with the Court. They trust that they will be safe. It helps children become resilient and puts them on the path to overcoming the trauma that they have experienced.

We need to establish more programs; to train more advocates; to serve more children.



An increase in State funding will allow us to do just that. The additional funding proposed in Senate Bill 128, will be used to broaden our reach. To build capacity. To serve ALL eligible children in our existing programs in over 14 counties. And to create new programs in the 58 remaining counties without one.

I am happy to report that I recently transitioned into the role as Executive Director in our newest CASA program in the State of Wisconsin - CASA of Marathon County. We are in the very beginning stages of setting up the organization. We have had overwhelming support and interest in our program, and we are hoping to train our first class of advocates in late summer/early fall of 2023. We couldn't accomplish this goal without the support of state funding through Wisconsin CASA.

In 2022, the State of Wisconsin received more than 22,000 reports of child abuse or neglect that were investigated by Child Welfare agencies. Over 500 of those investigations were in my home county of Marathon. I am excited about the opportunity to give these children a voice by providing trained volunteers that will advocate for their needs and be a crucial team player in supporting the goals of the case plan.

Our slogan, "I AM FOR THE CHILD," is also our call to action. It is a reminder that every child deserves a safe and loving home, and that we all have a responsibility to protect them. The role of the CASA advocates was granted by legislation initially passed in 1999 as Wisconsin Act 149. One can only assume, that the legislators at that time envisioned a State where a CASA Advocate was provided to every child encountering the care and protection system. Now nearly 25 years later, we have a long way to go to making this vision become a reality.

It costs approximately \$80,000 in the first year to start up a new CASA program, and a start-up program takes about 18-24 months to become established. That equates to thousands of additional Wisconsin children receiving a CASA advocate. Thousands of dollars saved by our counties and our court systems. Thousands of Wisconsin children helped when they are the most vulnerable. Thousands of Wisconsin children connected to a trusting and consistent adult.



Furthermore, studies show that investing in CASA programs can have long-term cost savings for the state. When children are placed in stable, permanent homes more quickly, there are fewer costs associated with long-term foster care and a decreased likelihood of the child entering the criminal justice system later in life. By investing in CASA now, we can save money in the future.

In conclusion, I urge you to support Senate Bill 128 and to increase the appropriations funding accordingly to the Wisconsin CASA organization. By doing so, we can ensure that every child in Wisconsin has access to the support and advocacy that they need to thrive and that their voices are heard. Thank you for your time.

Melissa Michel -

Hello, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. My name is Melissa Michel and I am the Executive Director for WI CASA.

Count Appointed Special Advocates – this is important, they are volunteers! Individuals who are willing to donate their time and attention to advocating on behalf of the children who need it most.

Current CASA advocates average 2 hours of contact with children per week. In addition, indirect time spent on training, documentation, court reporting, fundraising and events translates to over 100,000 hours of advocacy per year. This equivalates to 54 full-time positions or 2.2 million dollars in wages annually.

The CASA program model amazes me. Willing volunteers, people doing critical work that is essential to the health and wellbeing of WI children under court protection who have experienced the trauma of abuse and or neglect. A CASA is a consistent face, providing in-person visits weekly and developing a beneficial relationship with the child that is impactful in many instances and follows them forever. A CASA provides best interest advocacy from a child-centric perspective and comprehensive information that is significantly valuable to the judge.



Wisconsin CASA's goal – through the local CASA programs, is to support children by shortening the time it takes to achieve permanency. Break the cycle early to reduce the likelihood of negative long-term effects that can follow a child into adulthood. Additional funding will further sustain CASA and grow programs with increased funding to support additional resources and positions necessary to enhance the programs to serve more children. For new programs, additional funding will increase the length of pass-through financial support from 2 years to a minimum of 3 years. Funds will also be used to add outreach coordinators to secure relationships in new counties and develop CASA programs in the remaining 58 WI counties.

I ask you to support Senate Bill 128 and increase Wisconsin CASA's appropriations funding so we can advocate for more Wisconsin Children. Thank you for your time today...

Cheri Dvorak- Program Director, CASA of Dane and Columbia Counties

Count Appointed Special Advocates – this is important, they are volunteers! Individuals who are willing to donate their time and attention to advocating on behalf of the children who need it most.

Current CASA advocates average 5 hours of contact with children per week. In addition, indirect time spent on training, documentation, court reporting, fundraising and events translates to over 100,000 hours of advocacy per year. This equates to 54 full-time positions or 5.5 million dollars in wages annually.

The CASA program model amazes me. Willing volunteers, people doing critical work that is essential to the health and wellbeing of WI children under court protection who have experienced the trauma of abuse and or neglect. A CASA is a consistent face, providing in-person visits weekly and developing a beneficial relationship with the child that is impactful in many instances and follows them forever. A CASA provides best interest advocacy from a child-centric perspective and comprehensive information that is significantly valuable to the judge.

Wisconsin CASA Association

2022 Impact Report

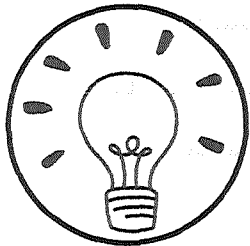


Wisconsin Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) Association champions the needs of children who have experienced abuse or neglect by supporting and expanding local CASA programs.

What sets CASA apart

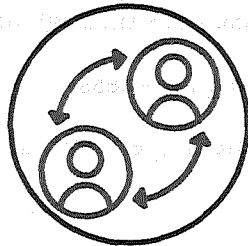
- Volunteers receive 30 hours of specialized training before being sworn in by a judge
- Advocates do in-person visits with the child at least once a week
- A CASA is an additional consistent resource who is able to provide supplemental information from a child centric viewpoint that can be critical to a child's wellbeing in an overwhelmed child welfare system

Advocates work in the best interest of the child



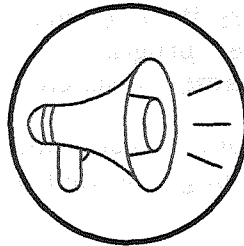
Learn

Advocates get to know the child and learn about their family and life.



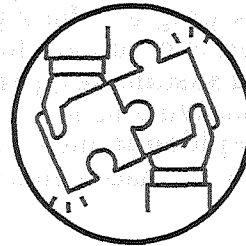
Engage

Children and Advocates meet for at least an hour a week, getting to know each other and the child's situation.



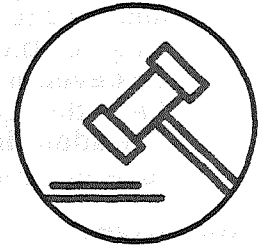
Recommend

Advocates speak up for the child's best interest in court, until the case is closed.



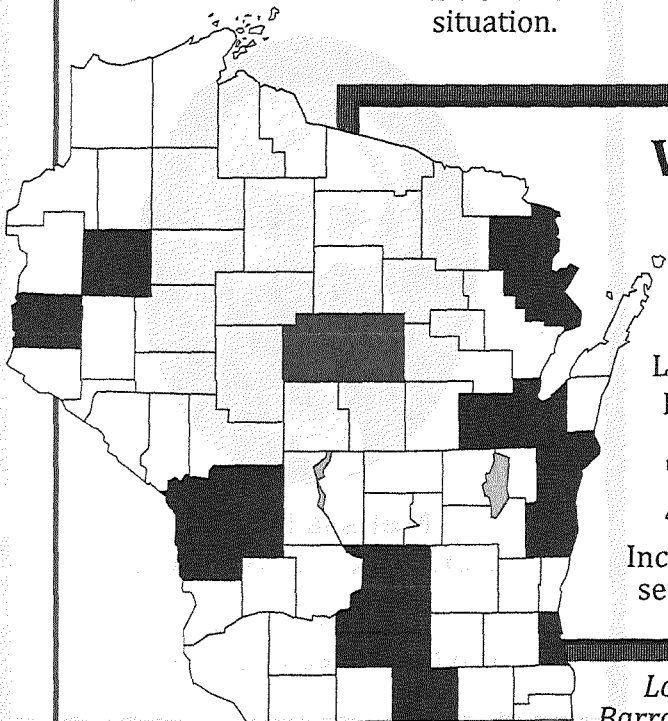
Collaborate

Advocates work with the child's inner circle of support to ensure they're getting the care and attention they need.



Report

Advocates report what they have learned and observed to the court.



Wisconsin CASA in 2022

by the numbers

9

Local CASA programs

14

Counties served

500+

Advocates

954

Children served

24%

Increase in children served since 2017

6,000-7,000

Wisconsin children in need of an Advocate

Local CASA programs currently serve 14 counties in Wisconsin: Barron, Brown, Columbia, Dane, La Crosse, Manitowoc, Marinette, Milwaukee, Monroe, Outagamie, Rock, Sheboygan, St. Croix and Vernon counties. A local CASA program is currently in development in Marathon County.

What you may not know

- CASA remains whether a child is in-home or in an out-of-home placement
- An Advocate can still be assigned with the Family First Act
- With the overwhelming number and scope of cases assigned to GAL's, a CASA is able to provide the judge a regular and timely report of the child's status and welfare
- Local CASA programs are members of State Task Forces and Committees tasked with improving outcomes for children and families in the child welfare and court systems

Barriers to serving more children

- A need to add **dedicated outreach resources** to create awareness of current CASA programs and to establish new programs in additional Wisconsin counties
- The **lack of available and consistent funding** negatively impacts the ability to effectively support current programs to add staff to supervise additional Advocates and serve more children timely
- Create **long-term sustainability**. Current funding only allows for pass-through dollars to be allocated to new programs for 2 years. We need to increase pass through amounts and lengthen the period of support for new programs
- To **develop and sustain new programs**, consistent funding is necessary to build and grow CASA throughout Wisconsin
- The **addiction epidemic** and need for increased anti-trafficking efforts have caused children to be in out-of-home placements for longer periods of time

Initiatives

- Developing more CASA programs throughout the state to serve more children in need
- Supporting children by shortening the time it takes to achieve permanency. Break the cycle early to reduce the likelihood of negative long-term effects that can follow a child into adulthood
- Increasing support by pass-through funding from WI CASA to local programs to develop and enhance local resources that enable more children to be served



WISCONSIN

Wisconsin CASA Association

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Wisconsin CASA is a member of
The National CASA Association



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