



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Timothy M. Kennedy

Senator Kennedy Stands Up for At-Risk Children in WNY, Calls for CASA Funding to be Restored in State Budget

TIMOTHY M. KENNEDY January 16, 2013

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Funding for Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) Program cut for 2013, leaving at-risk children without the support they need.

In the wake of horrible tragedies like the Sandy Hook massacre, Kennedy says we need more access to mental health services for troubled young people, not less.

Kennedy: CASA gives kids – who have no voice – a voice. You can't put a price tag on changing the lives of young people in our community

BUFFALO, N.Y. – Senator Tim Kennedy, D-Buffalo, is urging Governor Cuomo and legislative leaders to restore \$800,000 in this year's state budget specifically for the Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) Program. CASA is a national program that provides volunteer advocates for abused and neglected children in foster care and the family court system. Senator Kennedy wrote a letter to Governor Cuomo and legislative leaders to encourage them to support the CASA program. Elimination of this important program would prevent hundreds of at-risk youth from having access to an advocate that guides them through the court system.

"As the father of three young children, my heart aches for abused and neglected children who have to go through foster care and the family court system," said Senator Kennedy. "The

CASA program gives kids – who have no voice – a voice. You can't put a price tag on changing the lives of young people in our community. That is why I am urging the Governor and legislative leaders to fund this vital program in this year's budget. A statewide allocation of \$800,000 – \$60,000 locally – is a minimal price to pay to give a fresh start and a new beginning for those children who need it the most."

The Mental Health Association, the parent organization for the CASA program in Erie County, was notified in December 2012 that all funding for the CASA program would be cut, effective March 31, 2013. The notice came just hours after the tragedy in Newton, Connecticut. Last year, the state allocated \$800,000 to the CASA program, \$60,000 of which went to supporting at-risk youth in Erie County.

Kennedy arranged for the Mental Health Association to go before the Western New York Delegation today to discuss the CASA program and their urgent funding needs, because he believes the restoration of this funding should be a regional priority.

Senator Kennedy believes the restoration of this program is minimal fee, considering its monumental impact. Essentially, the program helps ensure at-risk youth have access to the services they need to avoid destructive decisions.

"In the wake of horrible tragedies like the Sandy Hook massacre and rising gun violence in the City of Buffalo," Kennedy added, "it's clear our state needs more access to mental health services for troubled young people, not less,"

"CASA provided assistance to 198 children thanks to 40 unpaid volunteers and critical state funding," said Kenneth Houseknecht, executive director of the Mental Health Association.

"CASA's advocacy can be life-changing for these children, resulting in adoptions and assistance they may not have received otherwise. Despite the number of children we helped

last year, we still had more waiting for our help and the list grows longer every day. I thank Senator Kennedy for his strong support of CASA, and I encourage Governor Cuomo and the leaders of the Senate and Assembly to fund this important program in this year's state budget."

The final day for submission of the executive budget proposal is January 22. Senator Kennedy's push comes as final budget considerations are being made. You can read Senator Kennedy's letter below or [view a copy by visiting this link](#).

Senator Kennedy also encouraged Western New Yorkers to sign [this petition to restore funds for the Erie County CASA program](#).

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Senator Timothy M. Kennedy represents the New York State Senate's 63rd District, which is comprised of the town of Cheektowaga, the city of Lackawanna and nearly all of the city of Buffalo. More information is available at <http://kennedy.nysenate.gov>.

Hon. Andrew Cuomo

Governor

New York State

The Executive Chamber

State Capitol

Albany, New York 12224

Dear Governor Cuomo,

I write today to express the importance of funding for the Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) program in Erie County and across the state. The horrific tragedy our

nation witnessed last month in Newtown, CT points to the need for *more* access to mental health services for troubled young people, not less. The budget for the Unified Court System was cut in 2011, and \$1.2 million of these cuts have been passed down to the Office of Court Administration (OCA). OCA then cut funding for CASA by \$800,000, which represents the program's *entire* budget.

It is critical the state funds this program in the next budget year. With Western New York and our entire state on the brink of losing this important program, I propose adding CASA as a line item in the 2013-14 state budget.

CASA volunteers speak up for the best interests of children in the Family Court System. These children have been removed from their homes because of physical abuse, sexual abuse and/or neglect. As the courts work to place the child in a permanent and stable home, the advocate works to ensure the child's everyday needs are taken into account. CASA volunteers talk to the child about school, friends, family, emotions and what they need on a daily basis.

Advocates work with family members, teachers, counselors, attorneys and judges, and they speak for children whose needs might otherwise be forgotten within the complexities of the court system. CASA volunteers give hope, stability and security to children who have been mistreated and let down by other adults in their lives.

As a state, we must do everything we can to prevent violence and ensure tragic events like the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting never happen again. When children have a voice, a mentor and an adult who cares about them, they are far less likely to commit violent acts against themselves and others. When children have access to mental health care, and when their mental health issues are identified early, they have a chance to receive treatment and lead productive, healthy and happy lives. For these reasons, I urge you to consider a line

item in this year's budget for CASA.

Sincerely,

Timothy M. Kennedy

New York State Senator, 63rd District

Cc: Assemblyman Sheldon Silver

Senator Dean Skelos

Senator Jeff Klein

Senator Andrea Stewart-Cousins