

TESTIMONY

OF

**CHERYL VALLEE
MEMBER OF THE BOARD
COURT APPOINTED SPECIAL ADVOCATES OF NEW YORK STATE**

**PRESENTED TO THE
NEW YORK STATE SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE
AND
NEW YORK STATE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS**

**REGARDING THE
NEW YORK STATE PUBLIC PROTECTION BUDGET PROPOSALS
STATE FISCAL YEAR 2015-2016**

FEBRUARY 26, 2015

Good afternoon. My name Cheryl Vallee and I am the Executive Director of the Center for Community Justice in Schenectady, New York, and a board member of the Court Appointed Special Advocates Program of New York State (CASANYS). I would like to thank Chairman Farrell and Chairman DeFrancisco and the members of the Assembly Ways and Means and Senate Finance Committees for this important opportunity to testify.

Today I am here to thank you, on behalf of our board members, program directors, our volunteers, and the children we serve throughout the state, for your ongoing support of the

CASA Programs Statewide and specifically for your support during last year's budget session. Due to this support, this year 19 local CASA Programs across the state have continued to advocate on behalf of more than 2600 abused and neglected children in foster care. We have been included in the 2015-16 proposed OCA budget, and we are pleased and thankful to Judge Prudenti and OCA that we will be able to continue to offer crucial assistance to a critical mass of New York State's most vulnerable children.

We are also pleased and thankful that the Senate last year passed legislation that would recognize the enormous value CASA provides to the Family Courts and codify the existing Court Rules governing CASA programs, and that again this year the same bill is being considered for passage by the Senate. Legislation will further enable Family Court judges to utilize CASA volunteers and will strengthen this vital program throughout the State.

All CASA programs strive to achieve the same goal: to ensure that every abused and neglected child be placed in a safe, permanent home while taking into consideration each of their emotional, educational and physical needs. CASA volunteers are screened, trained and supervised in their activities. They come from a variety of professional, educational and ethnic backgrounds. By being assigned only one or two cases at a time, the CASA volunteer can dedicate a sufficient amount of time and energy to fully explore the needs of each assigned child and engage in dialogue directly with the child, parents, foster parents, family members, medical and mental health care providers, case workers, school officials, and other service providers involved in the child's life. The volunteer typically submits a written report to the Family Court Judge prior to each court hearing. This report provides the Family Court Judge with critical information on a child's well-being, and whether there are any unmet needs which need to be

addressed. The information and perspective which a CASA Advocate can supply is often instrumental in helping the judge determine what is in the child's best interests.

Studies have shown that children who have been assigned CASA volunteers spend less time in the foster care system than those who do not have CASA representation. Judges have observed that a child assigned a CASA volunteer also has a better chance of finding a permanent home than a child where no such assignment has been made.¹ In 2012, of the 103 family court judges in the State who handle abuse and neglect proceedings, 94 judges or 91 percent assigned CASA volunteers.

As Judge Prudenti noted in the New York Law Journal: "over the past three decades, while Family Court filings have increased by an astounding 90 percent, the number of Family Court judgeships has been increased by only 8.8 percent."² At a time when Family Court Judges are facing ever more burdensome dockets, and fewer resources, CASA volunteers are a great safeguard in assuring that the physical and emotional needs of these most vulnerable children - - victims of abuse and neglect - - remain a priority and get the judicial attention which is needed. For this reason alone, CASA should continue to be supported and nurtured.

Since the lion's share of CASA's work is performed by dedicated volunteers, CASA programs could not be any more cost efficient. And they are not solely dependent on government sources. We are independent non-profits and rely primarily on the support of foundations, corporations, religious organizations and individuals to enable continued operation. In 2012, 700 volunteers in 30 counties served over 2600 children. Together, volunteers in 2012 contributed 73,619 hours. Based on the Independent Sector's 2010 calculation of \$27.32 per

¹ See the website for the National CASA Association, www.casaforchildren.org. For additional statistical information concerning the benefits of CASA intervention in the lives of abused and neglected children.

² New York Law Journal, January 27, 2014,

hour for a volunteer in New York State – a figure used to quantify volunteer contributions – this amounts to over \$2 million a year in donated time.³ Most of the financial support received by CASA programs is used to recruit, train and supervise these volunteers. This is as sound an investment in our children as our state could ever make.

With your continued support we will continue to serve this population of vulnerable children in New York State and continue to build on the success of the programs already in existence. Court Appointed Special Advocates are, and must continue to be, critical partners with all other civil legal service providers in the family courts to ensure that, for these seriously at risk children, justice is fully served.

Thank you.

³ Value of Volunteer Time, Independent Sector. Available at: http://www.independentsector.org/volunteer_time. 2013.