

The Child Welfare System through the Lens of a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)

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Becoming a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) for Franklin County has been the single, most life-changing, best decision I have ever made. As a current social work student who is passionate about reforming the child welfare system to ensure it adequately serves every child, I have made it my mission to learn all the ins and outs that make up this system. Over the past six months as a volunteer, I have seen first-hand the need for reforms in key areas.



As a community, we must envision a system that offers support to families and children to help them thrive. As children come into contact with the child welfare system, we have an opportunity to provide meaningful interventions that prevent painful separations. However, in 2018, **Ohio had a 7.8 percent** recurrence rate causing the state to be among the ten states with the highest recurrence rates (Children's Bureau, 2018).

Child Welfare System in Ohio

- 101,243 reports screened in related to child abuse or neglect, dependency, or families in need of services
- 78% of cases last just under two years
- 55% percent of children involved with the system are placed in licensed foster homes and 26% of children are placed in approved relatives/kinship care
- There are 45 local CASA programs in Ohio serving children in 55 counties

In my experience as a CASA volunteer, one specific case forced me to ask the question of how the child welfare system can better equip parents to provide a safe and stable home for their children. In this case, three siblings were removed from their mother's custody. After their removal, their parent was presented with a course of action they were required to take in order to have the children returned to their care. Those actions included a mental health assessment and parenting classes. The parent completed the case plan requirements and tested out of both mental health counseling and parenting classes. As a result, the children were returned to their parent because they no longer needed to continue with counseling. It was at this point that I asked myself whether or not the system adequately

did its job of ensuring their parent was provided the best possible resources to avoid repeated removal in the future. What changed from when the children were removed to returning to their parent's care? These questions must be asked if we are to ensure that interventions prevent unnecessary removals and provide the best possible resources to help parents be successful.

We must continue to move forward and create a vision for the system that emphasizes effective and positive communication with everyone involved.

Communication between everyone involved within a child welfare case is absolutely critical because the success of a case relies on active conversations between the caseworkers, child welfare attorneys, attorneys for the state of Ohio, and everyone else that works to reunite children with their parents. Listed below are just a few of the organizations and/or individuals involved which emphasizes the need for detailed communication throughout the system.

- The **Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)** is a volunteer appointed to a child welfare case to represent the children's best interest in the courtroom. In order to do this to the best of their ability, the volunteer meets with the children, biological parents, foster parents or kinship providers, counselors, school teachers, the child welfare caseworker, and any other individuals involved within the case. The CASA always has the children's best interest at heart.
- The **CASA Attorney** is present in the courtroom to represent CASA and states what should happen moving forward and if there should be any changes made to services. They also work closely with the volunteer assigned to the case to ensure that the children are happy and healthy during their time involved with the child welfare system.
- The **Caseworker** works for a child welfare agency and works with all parties involved to resolve the issue that caused a case to open in the first place. This individual is in charge of designing a case plan with specific goals for the family and ensuring steps are taken to achieve those goals and close the case. The caseworker provides resources to the parents to help complete the case plan and also meets with all parties involved to ensure that the children remain safe during this process.
- The **Caseworker Attorney** represents the child welfare agency during a court hearing, states what the agency recommends moving forward and if there should be any changes in services, and provides information regarding the case plan.
- The **Parents' Attorney** represents the parent(s) in the case, and gathers information to provide recommendations based on that information and ensure the parents have a voice and also an understanding of the legal proceedings and process.
- The **Children's Attorney** represents the child or children involved. When there is a request for changes in services, the children involved with the case are appointed an attorney to ensure that the children's wishes are represented in court as well.

- The **Attorney for the state of Ohio** is the defense attorney that represents Ohio and works with all parties to ensure the case is properly handled with a focus on reunification or the child's best interest.



I have received phone calls from a mental health counselor because a mom in one of my cases thought I was the caseworker and should be the point of contact. I also received a call from one of the child's counselors to ask me questions that I was unable to answer because they were directed towards the caseworker's role. The counselor stated that the children's caregiver gave my contact information instead of the child welfare agency worker. While I am more than happy to assist anyone that calls to the best of my ability, I oftentimes cannot, which adds a level of uncertainty and confusion as to who is responsible for what. In my position, I do my best to help clarify these roles.

I have experienced numerous situations where each party involved came to a court hearing with very different understandings about the best next steps for the case moving forward. These types of misunderstandings cause the case to be extended unnecessarily meaning that the child time with child welfare services are extended. In some instances, it even prevented children from returning home to their biological parents because of the lack of communication between those in attendance for the court hearings. This issue is not due to a lack of funding within the welfare system, but can be looked at as a systematic issue.

A team approach would bring all of these people together with the family before the court hearing to create a plan. One evidenced-based approach, [Safe Babies Court Teams](#), is being implemented in four Ohio counties to address the specific cases of children from birth to age three. Better coordination and communication between all the professionals who are working in the best interest of the child and their parents is needed.

Recommendations

- Provide statewide support for CASA and Safe Babies Court Teams
- Enable CASA and Safe Babies Court Teams to work together to emphasize communication within the system
- Expand the court team approach to serve families with children of all ages
- Leverage court teams to ensure parents are offered evidenced-based interventions
- Build statewide infrastructure to provide evidence-based interventions like those outlined in the [Family First Prevention Clearinghouse](#)
- Increase the federal reimbursement rate Title IV-E Family First Prevention Programs up from 50% to 100%, similar to the provision in the bipartisan [Supporting Foster Youth and Families through the Pandemic Act \(H.R.7947\)](#).