

CASA volunteers advocate for foster children

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Behind the visage of the "typical" happy household, hundreds of children in [Bergen County](#) are estranged from their parents, shuffled among foster homes and group homes and in danger of falling through the cracks as they search for a more permanent life.

A handful of [Ridgewood](#) residents have reached out to advocate for these children.

Signing up to be a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) is not a typical volunteer job. Volunteers are assigned by the county's family court system to work with children removed from their homes due to parental abuse or neglect. Cases assigned to CASA are often the most difficult: these children tend not to have an extended family member to turn to, and nearly all are related to the abuse of alcohol and illegal or prescription drugs.

"It's very non-selective. Every town in [Bergen County](#) has a kid in CASA," said resident Paul Crann, who, along with his wife, Nancy, volunteers with CASA. "It crosses economic and philosophical borders. It's drugs and alcohol. It tears your heart out."

CASA volunteers effectively become the "eyes and ears of the court," as executive director Jennifer Murrin explained. They are responsible for preparing reports every few months for the family court judge, based on extensive information-gathering from the people in their appointed child's life: foster parents, therapists, guidance counselors, and their Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) representative, among many others. It is in these courts where important decisions on the child's life are made.

Day to day, there is also the task of simply staying in touch. This generally involves many phone calls and text messages. Volunteers also arrange to see their child in person at least once every two weeks.

Of the 78 CASA volunteers in [Bergen County](#), [Ridgewood](#) residents account for about 10 percent.

"[Ridgewood](#) is a very volunteer-oriented town," Murrin said. "The people that live here tend to get involved and know what's going on. They want to help."

For these children, the need is great. There are 327 children living in foster care in [Bergen County](#); CASA currently has the resources to assign advocates for 108 of them.

However, there are limits to the number of volunteers the program can oversee, since there is a maximum of 30 cases per overseeing case supervisor with CASA. Murrin would love to be able to accept more volunteers, but needs more funding to hire more case supervisors. The program receives

about \$25,000 from the state – half of what it received two years ago – which covers just a fraction of its \$300,000 annual operating budget. The rest comes from donations and funding from grants, which, Murrin noted, have been shrinking of late.

"The future is so uncertain with funding," she said. "It's the unfortunate story of every non-profit. But the need for these kids has not diminished. If anything, it's increased."

Working on a case can be a bumpy process, as volunteers and organizers testified.

"A case can change on a dime," Murrin said.

For example, Nancy Crann is advocating for a 12-year-old boy who was within weeks of getting adopted when he began to misbehave. Now he has been placed in a psychiatric institute, where he is slated to remain for as long as one year.

"In this case he began acting out, which a lot of children do, because they want to make sure you'll stick with them," Murrin said. "It's like, now the honeymoon period is over, and this is the real me, and I'm going to test every boundary possible because I want to see: Are you going to stick with me? Or are you going to get rid of me like everybody else has?"

"Unfortunately, a lot of foster parents are not really trained to deal with that," she said, "and so they get really nervous and don't know how to handle it."

Still, Crann says she stays very close with her child, who often calls her 10 – these days as much as 20 – times a day.

"He is just feeling very abandoned right now," she said. "I tell him, 'Whatever you do, no matter how naughty you are, I'll find you. I'll be there.'"

Nancy is one of the county's most seasoned CASA volunteers; she began to work with the chapter at its inception seven years ago. Paul signed on about a year later.

"Nancy really set the stage; she accomplished a lot for her case. I liked what I saw," he said. "It's very rewarding."

Resident Beth Holmes sought a volunteer position with CASA when her kids began getting older; she often uses her case to compare against the circumstances her own children have grown up with.

"They get it from me all the time," she said.

She oversees two cases – one nearing completion, and one for a 16-year-old boy. Her experience mothering teenagers allows her to feel comfortable communicating with him, she said.

"I'm not easily put off. I understand how the teenage mind works. They don't always want to talk to me, but they know I'm there," she said. "I just send him texts, like I do to my kids. My big one is, 'I'm thinking of you – You know how to get me if you need anything.'"

CASA is unique in that there is typically just one volunteer assigned per child – a far cry from the others in the child's life, such as the DYFS case worker, who generally juggles about 20 cases at once. This means that a CASA volunteer can actually step in to help more actively than a DYFS worker might have time for, such as to schedule a dentist appointment.

"You can help bring things to the top of the pile," Paul Crann said.

Still, the world of foster care is a difficult one to navigate; there are not enough group homes for foster children, and it can be more and more difficult for foster children to find permanent places as they get older.

"You can see how hard it can be to get older," Nancy Crann said. "But they all deserve a break. They're just kids."

The volunteers noted how resilient foster children can be despite the adversity they face.

"What's so amazing is how great these kids are. They may be from a whole other area and have such a difficult life, but kids really are so resilient," Holmes said.

For Nancy, the importance of advocating for children is a clear mission.

"Children are our hope and our future. If we abandon these children, we abandon our future," she said.

Someday soon, Murrin said she hoped the organization could offer advocates for "every single child in [Bergen County](#) that needs one."

"There's a lot more that has to be done, but I honestly think that CASA is able to make a huge difference for the kids that we are able to serve," she said.