

According to state law, Oregon should be providing every foster child with an advocate as they're ferried through the system, but most kids go it alone

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

Oregon has no shortage of unfunded mandates, but there is one on the books that, if fully funded, could help remedy some of the most serious problems plaguing the state's overburdened child welfare system.

According to Oregon state law, every foster child must be assigned a volunteer who advocates for their best interest as they're shuffled through the courts and bounced between foster placements.

This session, a bipartisan group of lawmakers in Salem is pushing a bill to make full funding of this mandate a reality.

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In the face of the state's budgetary shortfall, however, others are instead looking to make cuts to a program that's already falling far short of serving every foster child.

That program is Court Appointed Special Advocates, known commonly as CASA, and it serves all but one Oregon county, with CASA staff at 22 independent nonprofits overseeing 1,880 volunteer advocates.

Each of these volunteers' sole purpose is to advocate for the best interest of a child or sibling group in state custody.

For the 44 percent of foster children in Oregon who are assigned a volunteer advocate, having objective eyes watching their case can make a big difference in the way they experience the system.

Travis Lee, now 22, said growing up in the custody of Oregon's Department of Human Services, which houses child protective services, meant he had a different government-employed caseworker at least every eight weeks.

"There were times where I would go through three to four caseworkers a month," he said.

His foster home placements weren't stable either, leaving him without any continuous source of support.

But all that changed when he was assigned a volunteer advocate at age 9.

"I only had one CASA worker for the whole time," Lee said. "Always having different caseworkers - knowing that my CASA would always stay the same, always felt like some kind of relief for me."

His advocate has stuck by his side for 13

Someone to care



ILLUSTRATION BY JOSHUA MICHAEL AMBRIZ

years, even as he was moved away from Newport, where his case originated, living in foster homes in Salem, Portland and Newberg.

Lee said that before he got his volunteer advocate, he didn't really understand what was happening with his case.

"But my CASA worker put everything into words I could understand," he said.

Now an adult, he speaks at fundraisers for CASA nonprofits and still stays in contact with his advocate.

"It really is just an amazing program," Lee said. "I would take a CASA worker over a DHS worker any day."

Volunteer advocates are privy to a

child's medical records, family history and school file. They can interview the child's teachers, parents and other people involved in the child's life and visit the child in their home environment, whether it be a foster home or with their parents or legal guardians. If they suspect something is wrong, they can make an unannounced visit.

They are also there to figure out what is best for the child's safety, health and success, and to advocate for that outcome in the courtroom. They also ensure a child gets medical and dental care, and they can make recommendations to a child's school as well.

Shenetta Martin is a volunteern

advocate and a volunteer supervisor with CASA For Children, which serves Multnomah, Washington and Columbia counties.

She said that sometimes, while there may be a plan for a permanent placement or reunification with the child's parents, it can get stalled in the child welfare system.

It's the volunteer's job to help the judge understand that the "child deserves permanency as quickly as possible," she said.

Volunteer advocates are shown to reduce the amount of time a foster child spends in the system by 7.5 months, and more than 90 percent of children who

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