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have an advocate never return to foster care. These outcomes greatly lower a foster child's cost burden on taxpayers, according to an Office of Inspector General audit of CASA programs nationally in 2006.

At the same time, advocate-appointed children are more likely to receive the counseling they need to address trauma and abuse-related issues, according to CASA staff interviewed for this story.

Foster kids who have an advocate are also shown to have significantly improved academic performance, according to data compiled by the National CASA Association.

But above all, the program gives foster children someone to go to bat for them as they are ferried through an often frightening period of their life.

Unfunded angels

The public defenders, Oregon Department of Human Services caseworkers and others that may be involved in handling a foster care case are often juggling large caseloads.

"There could be a lot of people involved in a case, but those people have numerous cases - I mean *numerous* cases," said Kim Ell, a volunteer advocate in Multnomah County. The uniqueness with a volunteer advocate is they have only one case, he said.

When Ell received his first CASA assignment, he said, he went to Home Depot and bought the largest binder he could find, but it wasn't large enough to hold all the paperwork in the child's file.

He said it's not uncommon to see attorneys and caseworkers wheeling large cases full of paperwork into the courtroom. But Ell's a retiree, and he has only one case, so he's had the time to meticulously organize all the documents and case files, read through them carefully, and even double check the accuracy of their contents. All this puts him in a better position to quickly answer a judge's questions and relay his recommendations in a meaningful way.

Volunteers typically receive about 30 to 40 hours of training, and then spend an average of 10 hours per month on their case, however the time varies greatly depending on the complexity of the case and other factors.

While the majority of volunteers are retired, employed part time or unemployed, this past fiscal year, 33 percent were employed full time.

"I've done lots of volunteer work throughout my life," Ell said, "and this is by far the most rewarding."

Betsy Miller, executive director at CASA for Children, said every time a case closes, she sits down with the volunteer to see how it went.

"I would say nine times out of 10, the CASA (volunteers) will say, 'This is the most rewarding experience, and one of the most difficult experiences I've ever had,'" she said. "But CASAs also say if it weren't for my supervisor, it would have been much more difficult."

In order for a CASA program to be certified, it has to follow national standards requiring that a paid, full-time supervisor can oversee no more than 30 advocates or 45 cases, said Kari Rieck, executive director of Oregon CASA Network, which exists to support and represent Oregon's CASA programs.

CASA and the foster care system

Of Oregon's 11,554 children in foster care in the past fiscal year, more than half did not have a Court Appointed Special Advocate. CASA volunteers are shown to reduce the amount of time a foster child spends in the system, and CASA-appointed children are more likely to receive counseling to address trauma and abuse-related issues, according to CASA staff who spoke to Street Roots.

OREGON CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

Need a CASA:
6,520

56%

Have a CASA:
5,034

44%

SOURCE: OREGON.GOV OREGON CHILD WELFARE DATA SET, COUNT OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

BY THE NUMBERS

Average monthly cost of a foster child to Oregon taxpayers: **\$2,500**

Average yearly cost of a CASA: **\$1,300**

Average time, nationally, having a CASA shaves off a child's time in foster care: **7.5 months**

Cost of 7.5 months in foster care to Oregon taxpayers: **\$18,750**

Average number of times children in state custody move between foster homes: **6.6**

Average number of times children who have a CASA move between foster homes: **3.9**



SOURCES: OREGON CASA NETWORK, CASA FOR CHILDREN, OREGON DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

The lack of funding for these paid supervisors is why more than half of Oregon's 11,554 foster children this past fiscal year didn't have a volunteer advocate. Most nonprofits find that when they make a call for volunteers, there are plenty of people in their community who are willing to put in the time.

Shaney Starr, director of the Marion County CASA program in Salem, got creative and recently paid for sponsored

THE COST OF CHILD ABUSE

Total annual direct and indirect cost of child abuse and neglect in the U.S. (2014):

\$80.2 BILLION

Direct costs

Acute medical treatment	\$2.9 billion
Mental health care system	\$1.15 billion
Child welfare services system	\$29.24 billion
Law enforcement	\$34.28 million
Total	\$33.3 billion

Indirect costs

Special education	\$826.17 million
Early intervention	\$247.8 million
Emergency/transitional housing	\$1.6 billion
Juvenile delinquency	\$3.4 billion
Mental health and health care	\$270.86 million
Adult criminal justice system	\$32.7 billion
Lost productivity to society.....	\$7.83 million
Total	\$46.9 billion

SOURCE: NATIONAL COURT APPOINTED SPECIAL ADVOCATE (CASA) ASSOCIATION

FROM THE 2015 CHILD WELFARE DATA BOOK

(For fiscal year 2014-15, in Oregon)

Reports of abuse or neglect received by Child Protective Services: **69,972**

Completed investigations that found abuse: **6,708**
involving **10,402** victims

Percentage of victims younger than 6: **46.6**

Number of children who died from causes related to family or caregiver abuse: **27**

Number of perpetrators of abuse who were a foster parent or foster home: **104**

content in the Statesman Journal to attract new volunteers.

It worked.

She said she usually gets about 25 new volunteers spread across four to six trainings per year. After the paid articles, 21 people showed up to a single training.

"We know that when you reach out to the community with the call for advocates - we know we get a response," Rieck said. "More than anything, it's that we can't afford to

hire the people we need to do the job."

Some Oregon CASA programs have as few as one full-time, or even just one part-time, staffer who oversees all the volunteers for their region.

"From all sources, we run on about a \$6.5 million budget - about \$1,291 per child to have an advocate per year," Rieck said of all the programs across the state. "Currently, the state funds \$1.14 million, which is only \$219 per child."

Rieck said the governor's budget proposal calls for what amounts to a 23 percent cut to the CASA program, which she said would have the potential to end service for as many as 480 children.

The Joint Ways and Means Committee budget also recommended cuts to CASA, but it was less specific about how much.

We know from national data on CASA programs that fully funding it might actually cost taxpayers less in the long term than not funding the program at all. But due to the complexity of the child welfare system, the lack of CASA data specific to Oregon, and differences among the communities served by the state's 22 CASA nonprofits, it's difficult to pin down exact cost savings.

There are also lifelong cost savings for foster children who have CASAs, given that they are less likely to fall into the foster-care-to-prison pipeline and less likely to be reliant on social safety nets as adults, Rieck said.

In Oregon, a foster child's average monthly cost to taxpayers is \$2,500, according to the Oregon Department of Human Services.

It costs far less than that to provide a foster kid with an advocate for an entire year - about \$1,300. And doing so is likely to shave months off their time in the system. With more than 6,500 kids going without CASAs, the savings could quickly add up.

Early estimates of what fully funding the CASA program would cost give it a \$15 million to \$20 million yearly price tag, but as Rieck explained, that applies CASA's current bare-bones, full-caseload approach to management. The Legislative Fiscal Office, tasked with coming up with the cost of the bill to fully fund CASA, may project a vastly different number.

If House Bill 2171 passes, it would make that funding possible. It will likely stall in committee until later in session, but could come up for a vote after lawmakers sort through budgetary challenges. For one of its chief sponsors, Rep. Duane Stark (R-Grants Pass), the bill hits close to home.

"As a foster parent and adoptive parent, I've experienced what it's like to not have a CASA, and I've experienced what it's like to have a CASA," Stark told members of the House Judiciary Committee at a March 8 hearing for the bill.

"I've seen even in my own case, where CASAs were in court, and (the government-caseworker) had goofed some things up and couldn't technically make some specific requests of the court - couldn't actually say what they wanted to happen because their paperwork was not complete, and yet the CASA was able to be a voice there for the child, for the system, and for the foster parents," he said. "It was so important."

He said his bill is intended to bring in funding so Oregon can meet its own mandate that every foster child is appointed

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