

CASA: 'We have people from all walks of life'

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CASA volunteers are not attorneys, but they provide crucial services that can help foster children reach the best possible outcomes.

"CASA volunteers are focused on determining what is in the best interest of a child who is in custody of the state," Starr said.



Volunteers receive training on the child welfare system, the court system, cultural differences and self-awareness, interviewing techniques and how to prepare a good, quality court report. They are then asked to interview children, parents, social workers, school officials and others knowledgeable about a child's history to help determine what might help a child thrive and succeed.

"The volunteer is the eyes and ears of the judge outside of the courtroom," Starr said.

In one recent example, a CASA volunteer learned that mandated visitation was not occurring and found a way to help the process along, but solutions might be as simple as finding extracurricular activities to suit a child's interests and foster family bonding.

"Most (children) will go back to their families, but it has to be a situation that is safe for them. The kids will want to go back sooner, but what is in their best interest isn't always what the child wants," Starr said.

Starr said a grant-funded public relations push helped reinvigorate interest in the CASA mission, but other changes have also borne fruit. Starr herself was interested in becoming a CASA volunteer, but the training alone would have meant two nights a week for six weeks.

One of the changes she's instituted is a new training program that is completed partially online in addition to classwork at the CASA site.

"One of the reasons we needed a new space was that we couldn't offer trainings in our old building and we ended up all over the place and never the same place twice," Starr said.

Starr said if those who are interested in volunteering should call 503-967-6420 or stop by the office, 3530 River Road N., even if they aren't sure how they can fit into the program.

"We have people from all walks of life and that's what we want, a variety of backgrounds that brings diversity to the program," she said. "I'm also very appreciative of local employers willing to give employees time off to take part in programs like ours."

New opportunities at city for students

The Keizer Volunteer Coordinating Committee recently looked at the youth councilor and liaison program and is hoping to restructure the way it works with additional opportunities for Keizer students.

The city is now soliciting applications for volunteers to be considered to serve as youth councilor, youth committee liaison and/or youth page in the upcoming school year.

For the youth councilor, each school year one youth councilor may be appointed as a non-voting member of the council. The candidate must be a Keizer resident who is either attending high

school or a registered home schooled student. The youth councilor will be selected during the 10th or 11th grade year and serve during the 11th and 12th grade year. He or she will be required to attend Monday night council meetings and at least one additional meeting per month with a councilor (i.e. job shadow).

For the youth committee liaison, each school year one youth liaison may be appointed as a non-voting member to any city board, committee, or commission. The youth liaison position is open to all age groups. The youth liaison is expected to attend committee meetings of the group for which they liaison.

For the council page, each year council pages may be appointed to shadow councilors on a rotational basis at intervals set by the youth councilor. The positions are open to all high school students (ages 14 through 18). They will be expected to shadow a council member, attend meetings, learn, and assist as needed.

Applications may be filled out electronically at www.keizer.org. Applications are also available at Keizer Civic Center - City Hall located at 930 Chermawa Road N.E., or you can request an application be mailed to you by calling City Hall at 503-390-3700.

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committee, said he took time out of his schedule to ride along with members of the police department last year and what he saw was eye-opening.

"More than half the time was spent dealing with somebody in a mental health crisis," Thompson said. "We've got to figure out some way to ease the burden on the officers we have and add bodies. Are there other things we can do to make those resources more effective?"

Chief John Teague said KPD is already trying innovative ways to reduce the workload of the department's 37 current officers, including having a parole and probation officer and DHS workers work alongside officers in the police station.

"The smoothness of services is spellbinding. It's beyond what we expected to see," Teague said.

Despite those efforts, some members of the budget committee questioned the purpose of the meeting given the outcome was already pre-determined.

"When we look at the budget next month, we already know none of the priorities we've set will come about," said Ron Bersin, a budget committee member.

Bersin also suggested that

the revenues promised with the creation of Keizer Station have not had the impact the idea was sold upon.

In an effort to assuage continued frustration with the process, the committee decided to move the long range planning meetings to January with the hope of having more of an impact on future budgets.

Adding police officers generated the most buzz in the room, but the task force and city staff also took up more generalized problems with city finances.

Tim Wood, Keizer's finance director, said city staff traditionally start the year knowing they are given a budget greater than expected revenues.

"Then we ask the directors of each department to look for savings that will amount to \$300,000 to \$500,000 overall," Wood said.

City Manager Chris Eppley said he and Wood are planning to start bringing the expected costs more in-line with expected revenues instead of placing the burden on staff.

While revenues are expected to climb by about \$197,000 in the next fiscal year - primarily as a result of new construction and a 3 percent rise in property taxes - the city will have to pay out an additional \$166,000 to help cover the costs of the Public Employees Retirement

System (PERS).

Eppley said there are some possible ways that revenue might increase. He said revenues from marijuana sales might pay off better than expected, and leasing some city-owned land could add a bit

more, but cautioned against over-exuberance in either case.

"They are out there, but they will be slow and incremental and you will be frustrated by the (timeline)," Eppley said.

A full roster



KEIZERTIMES/Eric A. Howald

Officer Kevin Renfro, Keizer Police Department's newest officer, recites his oath of office at the Keizer City Council meeting April 3. Renfro was most recently a detective with Monmouth Police Department.

With the addition of Renfro, KPD now has a filled all the 37 officer positions available under the city's budget, but the department remains understaffed by most measures. Talks are underway to find additional funding.

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By Charles Preston

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