

CASA: Court volunteers for the most vulnerable

By JENNIFER COLTON

Casa may mean “home” in Spanish, but another definition can forge a way to help children find one.

In the foster care system, CASA – Court-Appointed Special Advocate – volunteers serve as the liaison between a child and the courts. A CASA volunteer is assigned to a specific child or sibling group and may attend court hearings, school meetings, and other functions on behalf of the child.

“The big thing is that they show up for court and are a voice – ears and eyes for the youth,” said Jesus Rome, CASA coordinator for Umatilla and Morrow counties. “They advocate for the youth.”

CASA began in 1977 when a Seattle judge had the idea of using trained community volunteers to

speak for abused and neglected children. The program has grown to cover almost every state and the District of Columbia. In Oregon, almost 2,000 CASA volunteers serve more than 5,000 children each year. Nationwide, the numbers are about 77,000 volunteers helping 250,000 children.

In Umatilla and Morrow counties, CASA is run through Umatilla-Morrow Head Start, and the CASA of Eastern Oregon program serves Baker, Malheur, and Union counties. In Grant and Harney counties, it’s run through the education service district.

The management may be differ-



Now dedicated volunteer, Steve Frazier of Hermiston took the CASA training just to learn what the program was about. That led Frazier to become an advocate for two boys, a position he had for two years. As the boys began to move out of the foster system, he took on two more families.

“It was a wonderful experience,” he reports.

“It was just rewarding to be able to make a small difference for them.”

Frazier says being a CASA isn’t for everyone, it sometimes takes thick skin, but for anyone with a desire to help, there is a great need. “I say try it and see if you like it.”

Becoming a CASA volunteer requires a deep interest in volunteering and serving children. Potential volunteers go through an application and interview, pass a fingerprint and criminal history background check and complete 36 hours of training and orientation. After those pieces are in place, the volunteer is sworn in as an officer of the court and meets with the case manager for a case assignment.

If you would like more information on becoming a CASA volunteer, you can contact Jesus Rome at 541-564-6878 or by email at casa@umchs.org.

“It’s different than being a foster parent,” Rome said. “It’s a wonderful program if you have time for it.”

Jennifer Colton is news director of KOHU and KQFM, and mother of three, based in Pendleton.

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ent, but the program is the same: Once a CASA volunteer joins a child’ or teen’s case, they remain a constant throughout the parade of strangers, including judges, lawyers, foster parents and case workers.

Rome said the goal is to have an advocate for each child in foster care; however, high numbers of children mean that isn’t always possible at the level they’d like. He reports that earlier this year they had 160 youth in foster care in Umatilla and Morrow counties – and only 40 advocates.

“We’d love every child that comes into the foster care system to have an advocate,” he said. “But because there’s such a need ... we have to pick the highest need youth.”

Of those 160 children and teens in foster care, 56 were identified as highest need, meaning they had a parent missing or incarcerated or parents with severe mental health issues. Rome said most children want to return to their biological parents, but if that isn’t possible, the CASA volunteer can help find the child a good home with either another relative or through adoption.