

Could you be the voice for a child in need? Scores of Coachella Valley foster kids without advocates.

<https://www.desertsun.com/story/news/2018/09/04/foster-children-waiting-matched-court-advocates-cv/1196894002/>



Before she dives into the fun chaos of craft time or a trip to the park, or even a visit to juvenile court, Melanie Royer, a volunteer court-appointed special advocate for foster kids, takes a moment to reflect with her assigned child.

The Palm Desert woman asks the young girl, “Do you understand what my role as your advocate is?”

“You stay with me,” the child says.

The Voices for Children volunteer advocates, known as CASAs (court-appointed special advocates) are matched to a child in foster care. For many foster kids, this volunteer is one of the only consistent, reliable adults in their lives.

The CASA's role essentially is to pick up the missing pieces. While social workers draw the black-and-white outline that foster kids need to survive, CASAs fill it in with color, which is to say they inform juvenile judges how the children can thrive.

CASAs spend quality time with their assigned child a couple times a month to build a consistent relationship. The activities are based on the children's interests from just getting ice cream to visiting a museum to playing catch.

In addition to nurturing a bond, CASAs are responsible for reporting on the child's needs to the judge. They advocate for the child's best interests related to their education, health, living arrangements and general well-being. They do this by keeping track of the child's academics, meeting with teachers and talking with the social worker, among others.

“I have contact with as many people in her life as I can,” Royer said. “For me, an important part of that is school because that is someplace advocates can really make an impact. We don't have a say in where the children are moved, but we can be involved in school. You can check in on attendance,

make sure she's getting assignments in, make recommendations for tutoring or push for testing if you see something has been overlooked.”



Melanie Royer, 67, of Palm Desert, graduates from the CASA training at the start of her volunteering experience with Voices for Children. (Photo: Voices for Children)

But most importantly, the advocates ask the child what they need.

Sometimes that need is as simple as soccer cleats because the child has always wanted to play soccer. Other times they might need a tutor for extra math help. Whatever the extra thing is, the CASA conveys this to the judge and the judge will order it to happen if he or she agrees.

“Mainly I listen to the child,” Royer said. “I speak for them in court. So, she and I may have a difference of opinion, but I let the judge know that. I might say, I think the child could benefit from this even though she doesn’t want to do it. I see her needs from an adult perspective and I convey that, but I also make sure her opinions are heard, too.”

In Riverside County, there are close to 4,800 children in foster care but only 280 CASA volunteers. Not every foster child gets matched to a CASA; there are about 135 children in the county waiting to be matched — some might never make it off the list. Voices for Children, a nonprofit, is responsible for making the matches. The 135 kids waiting to be matched were recommended to Voices for Children typically by a teacher or social worker who saw a need gap in the child’s life.

Volunteers are asked to make an 18-month commitment and to spend one-on-one time with their child at least once a month. Most volunteers see their match two to three times a month. The 18-month commitment is meant to create consistency in the child’s life, as their foster placement and case worker might change several times in the same time-frame, said Jessica Munoz, Voices for Children director.

Most of the children in foster care have experienced abuse and neglect like domestic violence or substance abuse in their home. In general, many have come from very difficult circumstances, Munoz said.

“A lot of kids have not had consistency,” Munoz said. “Nor have they had a chance to be exposed to things that they might enjoy or be good at and that can bring them happiness. Maybe a child discovers they want an outlet for creativity. That may not have been something she knew before.”

Royer said one of the children that she advocated for fell in love with making blankets after a trip to the craft store. It was an experience she never realized she wanted so much.

“During another time, I took the 17-year-old I was matched with to a CASA holiday party,” Royer said. “I wasn’t expecting her to enjoy it because it was catered to younger kids. But she was right there with the younger ones. She never had those experiences before like eating pizza and getting her photo with reindeer antlers. Those things that seem so common, but they never got to be little kids. And the older children can seem rough or edgy or sophisticated, but really they’re just little kids inside that never had those simple experiences like that.”

Royer said when she was matched with her first foster child, she was overwhelmed with the emotions surrounding the child’s case. She was convinced her child had the hardest life and came from the worst background.

“It was very dramatic, what this child was going through, from my viewpoint,” she said. “But then you go to meetings (with other CASAs) and you find out every case is like that and that there’s such a need in the county. I just can’t get over it. There’s such a need for volunteers.”

Volunteers aren’t forging alone, though. They go through training, a background check and are matched with a staff supervisor from Voices for Children who will assist throughout the process. Potential volunteers, who must be at least 21 years old, interview for the position and then participate in 35 hours of training. Throughout the 18-month placement, volunteers will have multiple opportunities to continue learning and developing as a volunteer. They will also be required to write a court report every six months and appear in front of a judge to answer questions about the child’s well-being and needs.

While the organization welcomes all volunteers, Munoz said they are in special need of men because it’s important for young men to have a strong role model in their life they can relate to.

For more information on how to volunteer go to www.speakupnow.org. For those who want to help, but not volunteer, the organization takes monetary donations, too. It costs \$2,000 to support one child for one year.

<https://www.myvalleynews.com/story/2018/11/09/news/retired-marine-continues-to-serve-this-time-its-for-foster-children/63267.html>

Retired Marine continues to serve, this time it's for foster children

By Jeff Pack



After growing up in the Northern California community of Hayward, Jose Padilla entered the U.S. Marine Corps to serve his country.

These days, the Temecula resident and retired gunnery sergeant is serving the needs of foster children as a Court Appointed Special Advocate or CASA volunteer with Voices for Children, a nonprofit organization based in Riverside that serves the entire county.

According to the organization, CASAs are advocates and problem-solvers who work one-on-one with a child or set of siblings in foster care to ensure their needs are met. CASAs visit where the child lives and where they go to school and observe most aspects of the child's life.

Since retiring from the military, Padilla became a CASA in 2016 and has served as an advocate on two cases.

"Jose is an incredibly generous and humble person, whose life has been marked by service to others," Jessica Munoz, executive director of Voices for Children's Riverside County branch, said. "Not only did he serve our country as a member of the military, but he continues to give by advocating on behalf of vulnerable children in foster care. We are so honored to work alongside and support volunteers like Jose as they make a lasting impact for our community."

During his military career, Padilla received the Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medal in 2005 and 2010, and the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal in 1997, 2000 and 2002. He now works at Northrop Grumman Corporation as a materials analyst.

"When I did retire, I found myself with some free time," Padilla said in a phone interview. "I know that when I was a child, I was surrounded by a lot of positive influences in my life that really helped guide me to make good decisions. So, I felt that now it was my turn to give back."

He said he felt like the CASA program was a perfect fit for him.

"Foster children are in such great need for that support," he said.

Padilla was not in the foster care system, but he heard of the program through a friend, did research on the program and recognized the need that foster children have for an advocate.

"From what I've experienced, because they are relocated so often, sometimes a lot of their information, their requirements and needs fall through the cracks," he said. "Because the caseload is so high for social workers, sometimes, just that addition help from a CASA could really mean that difference for that child."

Amanda Schaap, director of communications for Voices for Children, said that the perception of why foster children may be underserved in our society is based on the confidentiality that is required to protect the children.

"They have been through so much and need help to get through this really difficult time in their life," she said. "To help with that process of getting back to a safe, permanent home, it is really important for the court system to protect that confidentially, so it's not as talked about in our society."

Schaap said there is a misconception that the only way to help a foster child is by being a foster parent, but the CASA program provides another way to help.

Padilla, who is also a married father of four children, said his role as a CASA is important.



"For me it's become more of an emotional attachment," he said. "It's not a once a month, Saturday commitment. It does require me to become more immerse into the life of that child."

CASAs also review medical records, talk to therapists, meet with family members and relatives and write a court report every six months to provide information that the court might not otherwise have.

"There's really a lot of individuals involved," Padilla said. "My child has been told to do this and do that by so many different people, and I just told him that I am there as a friend. I'm there really to represent him and support him, to provide any kind of assistance that I can provide for him."

"The bond that's built is one that's not a foster child and a volunteer, but almost like a child of my own."

According to Schaap, CASAs are asked for an 18-month commitment. The amount of time a CASA spends with one child or a group of siblings depends generally on the length of time they are needed before being placed in a permanent home or returned to birth parents.

"A lot of our CASAs end up staying on longer than that," she said. "Either on one case or taking another case once their case closes."

Padilla said he wasn't aware of the 18-month commitment.

"I think I just assumed I would stay on as long as I could help," he laughed. "For me personally, as long as that child is provided that support that he or she needs, as long as I'm really needed."

Padilla doesn't really see an end in sight to his involvement as a CASA.

"This is really my focus, to continue with the program and support foster children," he said.

Padilla said his family is "very supportive" of his volunteerism, and it was his wife, a therapist, who introduced him to the program.

"I don't know how she heard of the program," he said. "She said volunteering for the program would be great. And that's how I got tied in with the children and never looked back. I think it was the best decision I have made."

Informational sessions are being held in Temecula for people interested in volunteering as a CASA from 6-7:15 p.m., Nov. 13 and Dec. 11. The address for the sessions will be provided to interested parties after registering for the session.

To register or for more information about Voices for Children, visit <http://www.speakupnow.org>.

LOCAL NEWS

Voices for Children volunteers stand up for Riverside County foster youths

The Court Appointed Special Advocate program is looking for more people willing to give their time.



Volunteers attend Advocate University at Voices for Children, where they are trained to become advocates before being matched with a child. (Courtesy of Voices for Children)

By **REBECCA K. O'CONNOR** | The Community Foundation

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Riverside County volunteers are creating a better future for youths by being advocates and voices for children in need.

Voices for Children, the official Court Appointed Special Advocate program for Riverside County, recruits, trains, and assists volunteers who are appointed by judges to advocate for children in the foster care system.

An advocate gets to know the child with whom they work on one on one, sharing reports and making recommendations to the judge on decisions such as visitation and reunification with biological parents, education and additional services.



Voices for Children trains volunteers to become advocates for children in the foster care system. (Courtesy of Voices for Children)

"A CASA serves as an official vote for the child," Jessica Muñoz, executive director of Voices for Children, Riverside County, said. "Often the social worker is balancing a large case load, but the CASA is

advocating for one child or one family group at a time."

When there is an advocate on the case, the child has one person who lends consistency to a life that is often changing. Case workers, homes, and schools may change, but the advocate stays the same and is there to share the child's history.

This insight can be compelling, Muñoz said.

Tami Slagill, a CASA volunteer, has experienced the difference first hand. She has been an advocate for a young man for three years who has been in six schools and had seven placements.

"I get to have a true voice in his education," Slagill said. "It really gives me a chance to make the most difference I feel I can for him. When he gets to a new school, I'm there to take the guess work out and they can place him right away."

Slagill attended CASA training after her youngest child graduated from high school. She wanted to advocate for children, but says she imagined she would mostly be doing "fun and fluffy" things and just enriching a child's life.

"I don't think I really knew at the time that I could, and hopefully can, truly make a difference in this child's life," Slagill said. "When the judge addresses me in court and asks a question about my report, I realize he actually reads my report and understands."

While not all CASA advocates can be certain their work is having a major impact on the child's life, the young man with whom Slagill works gave her a letter she feels demonstrates the program's power.

"He wrote that he had thoughts of harming himself at one point, but I didn't know it," she said. "He thanked me for always being there for him and hoped that I would still talk to him after he was out of the system and he wanted me there for his graduation."

Advocates, on average, spend 10 to 15 hours a month volunteering. Currently, Voices for Children has about 300 advocates, but there are many children on the waiting list for an one.

The organization has a goal of matching 400 children with advocates and especially needs more male volunteers, Muñoz said. Still, it welcomes anyone who has a heart for children and want to advocate for them, she added.

About 50 percent of Voices for Children's budget is from private donations from individuals, corporations and foundations. Recently, the organization received a grant from the S.L. Gimbel Fund through [The Community Foundation](#). Those who do not have the time to volunteer can make donations.

"I wish more people understood how much of a difference one person can make with 10 to 15 hours a month," Muñoz said. "A lot more kids that would benefit from having a Tami in their lives."

Information: 951-472-9301 or speakupnow.org.

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