



# ANDRÉ JACQUE

STATE SENATOR • 1<sup>ST</sup> SENATE DISTRICT

Phone: (608) 266-3512

Fax: (608) 282-3541

Sen.Jacque@legis.wi.gov

State Capitol · P.O. Box 7882

Madison, WI 53707-7882

*Testimony before the Senate Committee on Human Services, Children and Families  
Senator André Jacque  
February 2, 2022*

Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 884, which expands the Court-Appointed Special Advocate program.

Court Appointed Special Advocates are a stabilizing force in a child's life. Under the existing Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program [Wis. Stat. 48.236 & 48.07(5), enacted in 1999], a CASA volunteer is a trained individual who is appointed by the children's court in a proceeding relating to a child who is alleged to be in need of protection or services (CHIPS). The CASA's role is to gather information and make observations about the child and the child's family environment, make regular, typically weekly contact with the child, monitor the family's compliance with the permanency plan and any court orders and any agency's provision of necessary services, promote the best interest of the child, and provide written information about these observations to the court. Trained Advocates are sworn officers of the court, reporting to the judge who oversees the child's case. Created by a judge for judges, CASAs increase the amount of information judges receive with independent observations and serve as the "eyes and ears of the court". Currently, the Wisconsin Court Appointed Special Advocate Association coordinates CASA programs in 13 counties and is part of a national network of nearly 1,000 state and local programs.

A CASA advocate meets with the child until their case is closed. CASA works- studies show that children with a CASA do better in school and spend less time in the child welfare system, and an advocate's consistent presence leaves a positive, lasting impact on the child.

CASAs also enhance the effectiveness of safe and permanent homes for children in Wisconsin, with a significant cost savings to the child welfare system of approximately \$2,200 per child annually, while reducing time out of home by 1.8 months, fewer placement changes, and a lower re-entry rate. CASA's are mandated reporters and help ensure children's safety, addressing issues before they become a crisis.

Senate Bill 884 requires the governor to allocate \$6.8 million of funds received under the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 over the next two years to clear the backlog and expand the existing CASA program to serve all eligible children in existing local CASA programs, and to create two new CASA county programs in 2022 and two new CASA county programs in 2023. There are currently seven counties ready and waiting for a CASA program: Racine, Marathon, Langlade, Trempealeau, Waupaca, Winnebago, and Sawyer.

Thank you for your consideration of Senate Bill 884.



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# PATRICK SNYDER

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 85<sup>th</sup> ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

## Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 884

Senate Committee on Senate Committee on Human Services, Children and Families

February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2022

Vice-Chairwoman Ballweg and members of the Committee:

I authored this legislation with Senator Jacque because I know just how impactful a Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) can be for a child. Currently, the Wisconsin Court Appointed Special Advocate Association coordinates CASA programs in 13 counties and is part of a national network. Senate Bill 884 would use federal funds to expand the program so it serves all eligible children in existing local CASA programs and create four new county programs by the end of 2023.

CASA programs use citizen volunteers to advocate on behalf of a child when appointed by the court overseeing a Child in Need of Protection and/or Services (CHIPS) case. These trained volunteers gather information through regular face-to-face visits with the child and make independent observations about the child and the child's environment to ensure compliance with the permanency plan, court orders, and to establish what additional services a child in a CHIPS proceeding may need.

The importance of a CASA during this complicated and traumatic process to act on behalf of the child can simply not be overstated. A CASA builds a relationship with the child and comes to know the needs and experiences of the child to advocate on their behalf – allowing a judge to more effectively make a decision that reflects the best interests of the child.

Expanding the CASA program in Wisconsin will only lead to better outcomes for children most in need.

Thank you for taking the time to hear my testimony today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

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PO Box 11412  
Green Bay WI 54307  
920.493.4856



**Senate Bill 884**

**Public Hearing, February 2, 2022**

**Committee on Human Services, Children and Families**

**Wisconsin CASA Association Testimony**

**Susan Schwartz, Wisconsin CASA Association State Director**

Good afternoon and thank you for inviting us to speak with you today. I am Sue Schwartz, State Director of Wisconsin CASA Association.

I would like to ask a question: how are the children?

Members of the mighty Masai tribe in Africa, greet each other saying "Kasserian Ingera" or how are the children? This greeting acknowledges the high value the Masai people place on their children's well being. When the response is all the children are well; peace, safety and their protection is in place.

So how are the children in Wisconsin?

Many of them are not doing well.

Through no fault of their own, they find themselves in the court system even removed from their families.

They don't understand. They don't know who to trust.

This is where CASA makes a difference! CASA stands for Court Appointed Special Advocates; who are specially trained citizen volunteers, who become the voice for abused and neglected children as they navigate the legal system.

As sworn officers of the Court, advocates are the eyes and ears of the court, providing helpful information to the judges who make the difficult decisions about a child's future.

CASA advocates also enhance the work of overburdened county social workers.

Most importantly they are the champions for children who often have no stable adult in their lives.

CASA's meet with their assigned children once a week for an hour providing an additional layer of safety.

They provide reports to the judicial system, sharing observations as well as the child's wishes.

CASA advocates become a trusted, stable adult in a child's life making a difference in many ways.

The outcomes of having a CASA on a case are tangible:

In 2020 and 2021, one child served by CASA's in Outagamie County re-entered the system; a 98% success rate. 98%!



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And then the cost savings to the county.

CASA's give more stability which achieves better educational outcomes. Again in Outagamie County in 2021, 96% of school age children served by a CASA advocate either maintained or improved their educational rating. 96%!

The bottom line is CASA advocates are a stabilizing force in a child's life. A force that makes a difference.

The counties served by a CASA program also benefit at no cost to the courts or the county.

The average cost for an advocate to serve a child for a year is \$2,200. \$2,200 to make a difference in a child's life, in the court and in the community.

Wisconsin CASA was incorporated in 1999. There are currently 10 local CASA programs serving 14 counties.

More than 500 CASA advocates served nearly 1,000 children in 2021.

But it's not enough; more than 6,000 children in Wisconsin are without the benefit of a CASA advocate!

Establishing new CASA programs and expanding existing CASA programs require time and funding, which is why we are here today!

I could talk forever about our impact and the need, but I'd like those who are on the front lines to share their impact in their local areas.

Please meet Julie Ribley, Executive Director of CASA of East Central Wisconsin. Julie, how are the children in Manitowoc County?

**Julie Ribley, Executive Director of CASA of East Central Wisconsin serving Manitowoc and Sheboygan Counties**

Hello I am Julie Ribley the ED of CASA of East Central Wisconsin....So if you are asking me how are the children in MC, "Are the children well?" The answer is no...no they are not! Many are abandoned, neglected, abused, lonely. They feel like they are stupid, undeserving, unimportant, invisible and disposable. Our community is not valuing children in a way that communicates otherwise. For many, this starts in their own homes, but the problems are greater than individual families. When did we, as a society, stop seeing the needs of our children....our future....as a priority for us all ....whether or not we even have children? We have lost the mentality that it takes a village to raise a child. And the consequences are truly devastating for our community.

The number of children in need of protection and services in MC is alarming and the number continues to increase. We have had an increase in fatalities and near fatalities of children that were under a protection plan with the department or placed in the home of their abusers. Children that did not have a CASA....children that if they did may still be alive today. We currently have 220 children placed out of home in MC with 140 on our waiting list in need of an advocate. There are many difficult aspects of my job. But the most difficult? Looking at that waiting list and trying to decide which child should have someone that will make sure their voice is being heard....that they are safe....that their needs are being met.....that they have the opportunity to thrive in a safe and loving home. After all, shouldn't all children have that???



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Court hearings in CHIPS cases are typically heard every 6 months. The hearing lasts 15 minutes which the majority of the time talking about how the parents are doing with their court conditions of return. The child is mentioned for such a small amount of time. The importance of the CASA Advocate giving the court objective information routinely through a court report is invaluable.

CASA volunteers elevate the voice of the child in every aspect of their role. By advocating through court reports, by providing information in court, by communicating with the case workers....in CHIPS cases we ask the smallest one at the table to make the biggest changes....to live with strangers, to change schools, to move from home to home. Shouldn't we make sure the smallest one making the biggest changes is being heard?

CASA of East Central Wisconsin is currently serving children in MC and just began a program in SC. We are using our resources to effectively and efficiently serve 2 counties. Because again why should just certain children have a CASA? Shouldn't the child victims in your county have a consistent adult advocating for them?

Our children need you to start advocating for them. In the words of Frederick Douglass "It is easier to build strong children than repair broken men." It's time for you to help us help them. Collectively our children deserve the opportunity to thrive in a safe and loving home. WE have to do better.

Please welcome CASA Advocate, Jennifer Morris Fodden to share her story.

**Jennifer Morris Fodden, CASA Advocate in CASA of East Central Wisconsin serving Manitowoc County**

Thank you for your time in listening to my story as a CASA advocate, My name is Jennifer & I was sworn in as an advocate in April 2015. I was matched with my first case shortly after and we had our first visit in August 2015. The unique aspect of this case might be that it is very atypically a lengthy one and I am still serving as the advocate for this child who was three when we met. In the six and a half years since I have been involved in his life he has lived in over 5 foster homes, several emergency relief homes, one unsuccessful reunification, two schools, two behavior programs, two hospital stays for behavioral & psychiatric treatments, and has had 3 different social workers. I have provided consistency in that aside from his mom (who had struggled with substance abuse and was not always constant) I have been an adult that consistently was in his life. CASA followed him throughout all his placements providing him with continuity.

To become a CASA advocate I was first interviewed then attended 30 hour of training & was submitted to a background check. Our training is thorough involving state guidelines, reading material, guest speakers films and visits to Court. Once training is completed we are sworn in by a Judge and then matched for advocacy on our cases. Additional on-going annual training is provided by our CASA office and is required by State Guidelines. A case typically on average lasts about 18 months to 2 years & is active while the CHIPS order is in place. CASA advocacy looks like this: an advocate visits the child once a week, gathers information from the child, his supports like teachers, doctors, therapists, social workers, as part of a Coordinated Services Team and bio family etc.. writing a monthly report to the courts. During my time with my kiddo we have gone from a child of 3 who couldn't read and wasn't adjusting to his environment to a 9 year old now placed in a behavioral treatment program. We have fun talking about his concerns or triumphs, we do art and origami and watch nature videos, we make crafts and cook together, we go for walks and try to toss the ball around. I try to open up ways for him to talk about any situations he may be experiencing. I talk regularly with his



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program case manager and mom to learn what is going on in his life and then offer support. This kiddo has experienced compounded trauma in his young life and attachment, trust and consistency have been a struggle for him. He has developed some poor coping mechanisms and he has shown while he is learning better behaviors while in the treatment program the regular contact he has with his CASA has been a part of his learning to trust and become resilient through his hardships. He has said to me on a number of occasions that I'm his buddy, I've always been there. There have been occasions when he moved placements and it was a few weeks before I could catch up with him and visit, he always has been relieved to see me. By CASA, me- being a person who carried through no matter what county he was moved to, what programs he was sent to, no matter what I showed up. I listened to him, played with him, involved myself in his interests and advocated for his needs in court.

By volunteering as an advocate I can show a child that they matter, that they are not alone in their experiences. That there is someone they can count on a regular basis. Children in Foster Care are often moved through several homes and shelters after experiencing much trauma. Trust, stability and consistency are highly important factors in the way a child's resiliency develops and therefore how successful a child matures and enters society as an adult. A CASA volunteer can help provide this consistency as the advocate specially appointed to this one child throughout their entire experience in the system. I can work with the bio mom as she prepares for successful reunification. It has been rewarding to see how a person who has many adult challenges, and herself suffered from her own adverse childhood experiences, begins to grow. This mother along with her children have gone from estrangement, poverty and substance abuse to steady employment, regular supervised visits to unsupervised overnight visits. My CASA child is learning to overcome and to trust. The family learns to build resiliency, a good formula to break a cycle of abuse and societal issues. A true Success story in the making. I don't know how to measure this financially but I do know that by being a CASA in his life he has learned He matters, he can begin to trust and build resiliency.

Every child matters and each of these children in court protective care needs a chance at being seen and heard and to build a life where they are valued and can participate and be a part of their community.

I would like to introduce, Sandy Johnson, Executive Director of CASA of Rock County.

Sandy, how are the children in Rock County?

**Sandy Johnson, Executive Director of CASA of Rock County**

I have witnessed significant changes in the child welfare system since I started my journey with CASA as a volunteer advocate 10 years ago. After becoming an advocate, I became so passionate about the mission of CASA that it eventually became my full-time career.

In October of last year, of group of foster parents, employees of Rock County, teachers and other community stakeholders expressed their frustration with the county's child welfare system and their fear for the safety of our most vulnerable children.



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So, when I thought about the question that you have been asked today, *how are the children doing in Rock County*, I knew a letter that was written by a local foster parent, and read at a county board meeting, would provide you the insight to answer that question.

*I have been a foster parent for over 8 years. In that time, I have watched the department become more and more dysfunctional. I have tried on numerous occasions to advocate for positive change. I was asked by the former CPS Program Director to meet and discuss my concerns along with other foster parents about 6 years ago. When the group expressed concerns about the lack of child focused case management, we were thanked for being on the panel and shortly thereafter, the panel disbanded.*

*I have a child placed in our home who has lived in limbo, without permanency, for five- and a half years. That should never happen. In my opinion, the department's slavish devotion to reunification at any cost has consequences. That's the bottom line, the department is so focused on giving parents chance, after chance, after chance to get their lives in order, and this is how a child remains in limbo for over 5 years. This is how a child gets further traumatized by the system that is supposed to protect them. I have a foster child who is broken. He is angry, confused and he doesn't know where he belongs.*

*We also have placement of a 10-month-old, who has been in our care for over six months, and no Birth to Three evaluation has been completed. My wife and I have made multiple requests to receive this service, and no movement has occurred. Foster parents should not have to beg for services to help these children, but sadly, this frequently happens in this county.*

Neither of these children have a CASA volunteer. They, like 75 other children in Rock County's Child Welfare system, are on our waiting list.

Our community has a fundamental obligation to ensure that the basic rights and needs of every child are met, especially those who are victims of abuse or neglect. CASA volunteers are a formidable force that fights for those rights.

Today, all of us are pleading that all of you be part of the solution. These children deserve better and it is time we prioritize their needs above all else.

**John Wangerin, CASA Advocate in CASA of Rock County**

Good afternoon. My name is Jon Wangerin. I am a CASA Advocate in Rock County. The child I serve:

- Older sibling was removed from his mother in 2004 and eventually reunified.
- Another case of substantiated abuse was filed in 2008 and then again in 2011.
- Mother had involvement with DCF in another state 31 times before moving to WI in 2011.
- In 2013, physical abuse and neglect to my CASA child was substantiated.

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- Following that, more abuse was reported to Child Protective Services in 2015 and 2017.
- My CASA child was removed from his home in 2018.
- He has now been in the system for over three years.
- He has lived in three different placements.
- He is currently living in a group home and the county has yet to find an adoptive resource for him.
- He has five step-siblings, who he rarely sees, that are spread out across three different foster homes.
- His parents have not met their return conditions.
- His young life has filled with trauma, uncertainty and instability. Is it any wonder that he has behavior problems?

I have been on his case since December 2019. Before I tell you who I am I would like to share with you who I am not. These are common misconceptions about CASA Advocates and assumptions that I get often from family, friends and peers.

- I am not just someone who plays catch with kiddo's at the park.
- I am not just someone who takes kiddo's to the movies.
- I am not just someone who helps kiddo's get a new backpack before the school year starts.

My responsibility as a CASA is a great one. I am the eyes and ears of the court. The written reports that I deliver to the court quarterly provides invaluable information as to what is going on with these kids as the judge makes key decisions for them that will impact them for the rest of their lives.

As a CASA Advocate I:

- File reports to the family court judge and all case parties that focuses on the child, their needs, and their wishes.
- Spend time with my kiddo's every week, providing them a consistent and positive outlet to express themselves.
- Meet with their teachers to understand how they are doing in school, and to learn about what additional support they need.
- Meet with their therapists to better understand what challenges they are facing and how to best support them as they cope with their trauma.
- Meet with their biological parents to understand them, hear them and understand their circumstances.
- Meet with the foster parents to hear them, support them, and be a resource for them as they manage the day-to-day needs of these kiddo's.
- Work in coordination with county CPS workers to be a resource for all of the members of the kiddo's team.
- Coordinate sibling visits for siblings that have been placed in multiple foster homes, giving them a sense of family and normalcy during unfamiliar times.
- Play catch with my kiddo's at the park, take them to the movies, and help them get a new backpack for school.



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This is what I do as a CASA Advocate. This is why CASA is so important for these kiddo's, and for our counties. Thank you for your time today.

I would like to introduce, Christy Keele, from Wisconsin CASA.

**Christin Keele, President of the Wisconsin CASA Association Board of Directors**

Good afternoon. I am Christy Keele from Wausau, Wisconsin, and I am the current President of Wisconsin CASA.

I have a bit of a unique perspective to share with you today.

I am an attorney. I am a Guardian ad Litem. And I've represented kids in care and protection cases for 15 years.

As a GAL, my role is to represent the best interests of children and to assist the court in making custody, placement and support decisions.

I have worked in a county with a CASA program and a county without a CASA program.

The difference is stark.

In the county without a CASA program, I was the only attorney dedicating 100% of my practice to representing children placed in foster care.

At times, I would have 75-100 children on my caseload.

There is no way you can possibly meet with all of them on a regular basis.

You do your very best, but there's no time to establish a relationship or rapport with a child.

Being in a county where there is a CASA program makes all the difference in the world.

When children have regular, weekly contact with an adult that they know cares about them, an adult that isn't going to leave them, it creates incredible trust.

They trust that their wishes will be shared with the court.

They trust that they will be safe.

It helps children become resilient and puts them on the path to overcome the trauma they've experienced.

We need to establish more programs; to train more advocates; to serve more children.

State funding will allow us to do that.

The additional funding proposed to you today, will be used to broaden our reach. To build capacity and serve ALL eligible children in our existing programs in 14 counties and to create new programs as well.

Seven counties are currently interested in moving forward and are waiting for funding to establish new CASA programs.



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It costs approximately \$80,000 to start up a new CASA program, and a start-up program takes about 18-24 months to become established.

It will also take capacity building at the state level, but we believe we can start 2-3 new programs a year if we receive this funding.

That equates to thousands of additional Wisconsin children receiving a CASA advocate.

Thousands of dollars saved by our counties and our court systems.

Thousands of Wisconsin children helped when they are most vulnerable.

Thousands of Wisconsin children connected to a trusting and consistent adult.

As I wrap up today, I will end with a question and an answer.

How are OUR children?

Your decision could make a difference in how that question is answered in the future.

Thank you.

Respectfully Submitted,

*Susan Schwartz*

Susan Schwartz

State Director, Wisconsin CASA Association