



# the Advocate Newsletter

2025 Vol. 1



Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) are dedicated volunteers trained to support children in foster care. CASAs come from diverse backgrounds, but they all share something in common: a heart for children and a passion for serving their communities.

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# New Year, Stronger Commitment

## Advancing Advocacy for Children

Dear Friends,

As we step into a new year, CASA of Yellowstone County celebrates the progress we've made and the opportunities ahead. Thanks to the dedication of our incredible Advocates and the unwavering support of our community, more children in foster care have a voice in court, a trusted adult by their side, and the advocacy they deserve.

Today, 140 passionate Advocates are serving 215 children, bringing stability and hope to their lives. While the need remains great—with approximately 600 children in local foster care—we are committed to expanding our reach. **By the end of 2027, our goal is to serve at least 50% of the children in Yellowstone County's foster care system, ensuring even more young lives are positively impacted.**

To make this vision a reality, we are taking exciting steps forward: hiring a Recruitment Coordinator to welcome new volunteers, strengthening training and support for Advocates, and enhancing efforts to retain our dedicated volunteers. Additionally, we are launching a new pilot project—the Program Advocate position—designed to provide specialized support for children with unique needs as they navigate foster care.

None of this would be possible without you. Your engagement, awareness, and investment in CASA's mission empower us to grow and serve more children in need. Together, we are changing lives—one child at a time. Thank you for being part of this journey!

Sincerely,

*Shayla Fox Brown*



Shayla Fox Brown  
Program Director

*Emily Gaudreau*



Emily Gaudreau  
Development Director



# Welcome to Our Newest CASA Volunteers!



A huge thank you to our newest group of community volunteers who began their training in January to become volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocates! Your dedication to helping children in our community is truly inspiring and we are so grateful for your commitment.

CASAs play a vital role in ensuring that children in the foster care system have a voice and an advocate looking out for their best interests. By stepping up, volunteers make a lasting impact on a child's life, offering guidance, stability, and hope for a brighter future.



**If you've ever thought about making a difference in a child's life, we invite you to join us for an Information Session! This is a great opportunity to learn more about the role of a CASA and how you can be part of this incredible mission.**

# Program Advocate

## Building Momentum in Yellowstone County



A few years ago, CASA of Yellowstone County began to dream about closing the gap between children in foster care with a volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) and children in care without a CASA Advocate. A solution rose to the top and we're excited to introduce our Program Advocate Pilot Project. Just like the dedicated CASAs who have upheld our mission for 21 years, the staff Program Advocate serves as a voice for children, ensuring their needs, wishes, and best interests are heard and addressed. We've made significant strides in our new initiative to support vulnerable children and families through the introduction of the Program Advocate role.

The aim of the Program Advocate position is to serve cases which might otherwise go without a volunteer Advocate. The Program Advocate is a full-time staff member with specialized training in three specific focus areas: cases involving domestic violence, large sibling groups, and Native American children. CASA of Yellowstone County has prioritized these populations as highly vulnerable populations in need of an Advocate as they navigate the foster care system. While volunteer Advocates will typically focus on one child or sibling group at a time, the Program Advocate serves multiple cases – typically 25-30 children at a time. They also handle their own case documents, much like a Program Coordinator would operate. In October 2024, CASA of Yellowstone County received funding from National CASA/GAL Association for Children through a grant from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. As this pilot project unfolds, we're taking a close look at what's working, how things are progressing, and where we're headed in the future. Here's a snapshot of where we stand.

### What's Working?

The thoughtful and deliberate pace of selecting cases and appointing our Program Advocate has been key to our success thus far. By allowing the Program Advocate time to understand each child, their family, and their unique needs, we've set the stage for positive, impactful advocacy. This approach has created a strong foundation for long-term relationships with everyone involved—children, placements, social workers, schools, attorneys, and more. A critical factor in our successes have been the specialized training the Program Advocate has received in areas such as Strengthening Families, the Indian Child Welfare Act, and domestic violence. These trainings have provided the Program Advocate with essential resources and insights to better serve children and families as they navigate the child welfare system. This knowledge has also fostered a high level of collaboration from all parties involved, creating a well-rounded and comprehensive support system for each family. The Program Advocate is currently serving 23 children, keeping us on schedule and focused on our goal of reaching a capacity of 30 children.

### Goals:

The goal of the Program Advocate position is to serve complex cases, those involving domestic violence, large sibling groups, and Native American children. Additionally, the Program Advocate's participation in specialized training in these areas is well underway, and they've successfully built relationships with local tribes and the domestic violence support network, which further strengthens the advocacy efforts of the entire CASA program.





We're evaluating and measuring the success of our goals through detailed data entered into the organization's case management software. This software captures key information such as services provided, child contacts, visitation, and conversations with partners and providers. This allows us to generate reports to provide a clear view of the Program Advocate's activities and impact.

Additionally, the Program Advocate and Program Manager, staff cases on a weekly basis, ensuring consistent oversight and support. All trainings the Program Advocate participates in are also tracked, adding another layer of transparency to the process. It's important to note that some of our anticipated outcomes and goals will take time to fully materialize, particularly as cases move toward closure. As we reach that point, we will analyze patterns and correlations—such as the relationship between types of placements, services provided, and permanency outcomes—to measure the overall effectiveness of the Program Advocate's work.

### **Looking Ahead: Flexibility and Growth**

As an organization, we are excited to see the progress of this pilot project and share results with our community, donors, CASA volunteers, Board of Directors, and other CASA programs across the nation. While paid advocacy is a new approach for CASA of Yellowstone County, the organization remains committed to its core focus on volunteer Advocates and expanding its reach through the engagement of community members. CASA of Yellowstone County's focus will remain on volunteer recruitment, training, and support to continue fulfilling its mission to serve the most vulnerable members of our community.

While this pilot project is still in its early stages, we are excited about the progress we've made and the opportunities ahead. We understand this initiative requires flexibility and adaptability as we learn and grow from each case. CASA's technical expertise, organizational knowledge, and collaborative relationships have positioned the organization to support the Program Advocate effectively, enabling the rapid expansion of services to more children with this funding.

CASA of Yellowstone County is grateful for the opportunity to approach the challenges of the foster care system with creativity and innovation. Funding for the Program Advocate position through the National CASA/GAL Association for Children enhances the support provided by 140 volunteer Advocates, allowing the organization to serve 215 children in local foster care. We deeply appreciate the dedication of community members who uphold CASA of Yellowstone County's mission and remain steadfast in their commitment to children and families.

This is only the beginning, and we look forward to the lasting impact this program will have on children and families in Yellowstone County. Thank you for your continued support as we refine and grow this crucial initiative.



**Alyssa Nelson**  
Program Advocate

# Creating Brighter Futures for CASA & Themselves



Meet Keona, our dedicated intern at CASA! Born in California, Keona has lived the last seven years in Montana and is now in her final year at Montana State University of Billings, where she is earning a Bachelor's degree in Psychology. As a twin and the oldest of four siblings, family is a big part of her life —along with her dog and two hamsters. When she's not studying or interning, she enjoys reading and painting.

Keona chose to intern at CASA because she was drawn to its mission of advocating for children in the court system. With a passion for forensic psychology and working with kids, she saw CASA as the perfect place to gain experience in both legal and child-focused fields.

During her internship, Keona hopes to learn more about working in a professional office setting, especially in comparison to the academic world. She's eager to understand how CASA supports children through legal procedures and is already picking up important legal terminology.

During her time here at CASA, Keona will be working with the Program Manager to conduct child surveys and interviews, recognizing the children we serve are our primary focus. Through a random sampling process, children will be interviewed using a standard set of questions, tailored to be age-appropriate. Their feedback will help us understand their experiences with CASA. Keona will compile the data and create a report to be shared with advocates, the board, and other partners, ensuring children's voices help shape and improve our advocacy efforts.



Meet Mariah, our practicum student at CASA, who has a lifelong passion for working with kids. Raised in Reno, Mariah has strong Montana roots, attending Skyview High before earning her bachelor's degree in social work at University of Montana. Her journey has taken her through Missoula, Salt Lake City, and back to Billings where she is working on her master's in social work through University of Nevada's online program. When she's not working, Mariah enjoys painting, reading, cooking, and equine therapy.





Mariah has been a CASA volunteer since 2022, and is fully immersed in CASA’s mission, calling it a supportive place to learn and grow filled with dedicated staff and volunteers. During her internship, Mariah hopes to deepen her understanding of trauma-informed care and learn more holistic and nurturing ways to support children. Throughout her career as a juvenile probation officer and working with teens, she’s seen a "tough love" approach used often, but she wants to shift the focus to understanding a child's needs through a trauma-based lens. She is especially interested in Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI), an evidence-based approach that helps children heal by identifying and meeting their unmet needs.

Mariah’s ultimate goal is to open a private practice for teens, ideally incorporating equine therapy. She believes in seeing youth as at-promise rather than at-risk and is committed to helping them heal and thrive.

**We’re thrilled to have Keona & Mariah on our team and can’t wait to see their impact!**

# Thank You, Claire!



We are beyond grateful for Claire, a 7th grader from Laurel Middle School, whose kindness and determination are truly inspiring! As one of just 10 students selected for the Benjamin Project, Claire was given \$100 to make a difference in her community.

**She chose to pay it forward and turned that \$100 into \$1,100 to support CASA kids!** Through conversations with local businesses and community members, Claire helped raise funds and awareness for children in our local foster care system.

**“I just really wanted to help kids who needed it the most,” Claire said when asked why she chose CASA.**

Claire, thank you for your hard work, your heart, and your commitment to making the world a better place for kids!

**Donations made by:** EBY, Hair on Main, Town & Country Supply Assoc, Yellowstone Bank, Woods Power Grip, GFK Trailer Sales, Inc., Dynamic Designs, Holly & Jason Anderson, Kelly & Sheryl Brester, and C&B Operations.

# Let's Talk About CASA

Have you heard about CASA on the radio, seen us on TV, or passed by one of our billboards? While those are great ways to spread the word, nothing beats connecting with people directly through conversation. At CASA of Yellowstone County, we love engaging with local churches, clubs, schools, and businesses to share our mission and show just how much of a difference our volunteer Advocates make in the lives of kids in foster care.



We're happy to talk to groups big or small, whether it's a quick chat or a deep dive with a PowerPoint (we make it interesting, promise!).

Interested in having one of us speak at your congregation or organization? Let's make it happen—reach out to Emily today! ([emily@yellowstonecasa.org](mailto:emily@yellowstonecasa.org))

## I am a **CASA** because...

"kids deserve to have a  
voice in court."  
-Mariah Brun  
CASA since 2024



"I love children and want  
to have a lasting impact  
in a child's life."  
-Alyssa Webb  
CASA since 2024



"I wanted to provide a compassionate adult  
presence for children in need."  
-Lisa Miller  
CASA since 2024



# Memorial & Honor Gifts



Your donation in honor or memory of your loved ones has a direct impact  
in the lives of children in our community. Thank you!

**In Honor of Kody Johnson**

Kathy Johnson

**In Honor of Debbie Richert**

Mary Richert & Family

**In Honor of Judy Kleman**

Gail Kleman

**In Honor of Vera Ulschak**

Lillian & James Hartung

**In Honor of Erin Zimmer**

Anne & Jim Nichols

**In Honor of Lillian & Jim Hartung**

Vera & Bob Ulschak

**In Memory of Gennifer Coler**

Elaine Taylor

**In Memory of Patrick Fischer**

Diane & Tom Fischer

**In Memory of Calton Bretz**

Mary Bretz

**In Memory of Gertrude Sundsted**

Jon & DeeAnn Egeland

**In Memory of David Munson**

Kathy Munson

**In Memory of Damon Gannett**

Dixie Bertagna

**In Memory of Marc Priest**

Arlene Priest

**In Memory of Ted Lechner**

John & Debra Miller

**In Memory of Joanne Leuthold**

Michael Paterson | Julie & Sheldon Hanser | Donna Sitton | Lynette Scott  
Geraldine Yanc | Karen Lungren | Staci & Ryan Grimm | Kyla Bauer  
Tracy & James Hawbaker | Linda Weidler | Diane & Kevin Nelson  
Mark & Kim Curtiss | Frank & LaDonna Oster | Homer A & Mildred Scott Foundation  
Virginia Allen | Kenneth & Jeannie Milota | Daniel Gall | Christie Lininger  
Rhoda & Paul Byorth | Lorri Nelson

