

Advocates speak up for abused, neglected kids



CASA of Southern Maryland program manager Michelle Deane Johnson, left, discusses a report with coworker Natalie Rowe, the acting supervisor of the healthy families program.

CASA volunteers undergo training before assignments

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Advocates often volunteer their time to help others in need. At Court Appointed Special Advocates of Southern Maryland, the volunteers speak up for abused and neglected children involved in the juvenile court system. These men and women look out for the best interest of each child they serve while helping work to secure a safe, loving and permanent home for them.

CASA — a program guided by the Center for Children

Inc. — serves children in St. Mary's, Charles and Calvert counties in hopes of providing them with the attention they need and deserve. This involves recruiting, training and supervising volunteers.

"It starts with someone hearing about the organization," CASA training and recruitment specialist Erin Walker said in an email. "Once we get an inquiry, we provide potential advocates with lots of information about the program and what it looks like to be an advocate. The person will then complete an application and an interview is scheduled."

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sioner Tom Jarboe (R) said. "I think overtime is good and people want it, but when it's forced on you, you're working the heck out of your people. It's too much," Commissioner Mike Hewitt (R) said. "That overtime at the

sheriff's department does concern me."

"I'm sure that he would love to have all the vacancies filled,"

Cudmore said of Sheriff Tim Cameron (R), who was at Tuesday's meeting.



Cameron

"I think the trend is that half a million's not going to be enough," Hewitt said. "We need to get a handle on this over the next couple of months."

Cameron, invited by the commissioners to speak, said the overtime budgeted for his office is driven by past county government budget practices. "Do we know we're going to use

more than \$511,000? Absolutely," he said.

The sheriff's office's new budget proposal calls for \$1.6 million for overtime for law enforcement and \$300,000 for overtime in corrections.

"Overtime for law is not driven by personnel. It's driven by events, typically," Cameron said. "In corrections, it's people driven," be-

cause posts and shifts have to be filled by a person.

Commissioner Todd Morgan (R) asked what the relationship between overtime and morale is in the sheriff's office, "knowing that you're short of people."

"Sometimes it's positive. Sometimes it's negative," Cameron said. Some people like working as much overtime as they can get, he said.

Police required to appear at district court in case their testimony is needed is the main driver in overtime costs. "Court costs us a fortune," Cameron said, as deputies have to show up after working 12-hour shifts.

"We are a 24-hour world and they are an eight-hour world" at court, Cameron said. "Typically any appearance in court is overtime."

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Walker conducts interviews with potential advocates, asking them about their past experiences, how they feel about things such as child abuse and working with people from diverse backgrounds. She said it takes no special skills, background or education to become an advocate, just a desire to help foster children.

If the volunteers are found to be a good match for the CASA program, advocates must pass a background check before being placed in a training class.

"The initial training required to become an advocate is 32 hours," she said. "The 32 hours is broken up over 12 hours of online learning, four hours of courtroom observation and six weeks of classes [which meet for 30 minutes] once per week. During the training, we go over mock cases, talk about and learn to recognize our personal biases, learn Maryland laws as they apply to children and child abuse and/or neglect. We also learn [how] to write court reports [and] recommendations for the court, who is important to a case and how to conduct interviews and research in order to understand and advocate for what is in the best interest of the child."

Advocates who successfully complete the training are sworn in within their perspective counties and ready to be appointed to a case, Walker said.

Angela Nadeau is CASA's senior peer coordinator working at the St. Mary's County Center for Children in Leonardtown. She has been with CASA since April 2015.

"My responsibilities and duties kind of have changed as we transition into that peer-coordinating model," Nadeau said. "When I started, I was basically supervising the advocates and we didn't have any peer coordinators. [But] we now have one identified peer coordinator in Calvert County [and one] in Charles County that are both active and taking on that role."

According to Nadeau, the peer coordinator in Calvert County oversees four advocates, while the one in Charles County is still learning the ropes, having only received training at the start of this year.

Nadeau said once more peer mediators are hired, her job will transition into being CASA's main point of contact.

"Once [the advocates] get out of training — whether they're assigned a peer coordinator or not — they'll be in contact with me to get their first case," she said. "Because I've been able to participate in the last couple of trainings

we've had, I kind of have an idea of what type of case the advocates are looking for."

Nadeau said she relies on Walker for information about the advocates' background and their preferences. This allows Nadeau to learn what specific cases and age range the volunteers may be best suited for. Nadeau not only works in partnership with the court system to assign cases to the advocates, but also walks advocates through the beginning stages of the process.

"Either myself or a peer coordinator will go down to the courthouse and copy the file with them for the first time and we explain how that's done so that in the future, they can go by themselves," Nadeau said. "We're really trying to empower them to be comfortable doing things on their own ... instead of relying on someone [else] to hold their hand and do it for them."

A key role advocates have is to facilitate communication between the court and any person with the child to ensure that all parties fulfill their obligations to the child, according to the Center for Children's website.

"They make their contacts with the DSS [Department of Social Services] worker, the child's attorney and the foster home first to make appointments with each

one of them and see the child," Nadeau said. "Then from there, just work the case — meeting with the parents, continuing contact with the professionals on the case, reaching out to the [child's] school and getting all the information that they can to be able to make an [informed] recommendation to the court."

Nadeau said advocates also receive additional assistance when they write their first court reports. She or another peer coordinator will arrange a one-on-one meeting with the volunteers. "If they're just not sure how to word something, we'll help them with that," she said. "The coordinator will then go over the report fully, make any corrections, send it back to the advocate and let the advocate OK that. ... Then they send it to me and I go back through it again to make sure everything is worded appropriately and I don't have any questions or anything like that ... before I send it to the courts."

In Calvert and St. Mary's counties, Nadeau sends the advocate's report to the family services coordinator at the courthouse, who finally distributes the report to all professionals involved in that particular case. But in Charles County, Nadeau is responsible for giving out the reports herself.

Nadeau has attended every court hearing in all three coun-

ties. However, that is not how CASA's peer mediation model is now set up. Therefore, she will only be present at future hearings when advocates are appointed to a case, she said.

"There's some other cases that may be in need of a CASA," Nadeau said. "I have not been with the program long enough to have any negative experiences or to really have had a case that really [stuck with me]."

Nadeau who holds degrees in psychology and business. Her goal and passion is to help foster kids in need.

"That's not because I have a history, it's just where my heart is," she said. "To be there, be a source of help [and] to be the person that can speak up for this child that doesn't have anybody else to do that for them."

One of the people who is a source of help is program manager Michelle Deane Johnson. She said she believes every child deserves to feel protected, safe, loved, supported and most importantly, like they matter.

But in order to facilitate the continued development and success of CASA, Johnson said it is important to keep striving toward recruiting and training more advocates so that neglected and abused children can have a place to call home.

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