

Dallas advocate agency faces critical shortage of bilingual volunteers

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Imagine that you find yourself, through no fault of your own, among strangers.

Everything seems foreign, and no one speaks your language.

Now imagine that you're a child.

It doesn't take much imagination for Dallas CASA bilingual volunteers to envision this. They see this situation constantly — and it's growing by leaps and bounds.

With a tough economy and many families living on the edge, the Court Appointed Special Advocates organization is in critical need of bilingual volunteers who can serve as voices in court for Hispanic children.

Last year, abuse and neglect were the main reasons about 450 Hispanic children ended up in foster care after being removed from their homes in Dallas County.

But CASA was able to serve only 125 of these kids because most of them spoke only Spanish, and CASA simply didn't have enough Spanish-speaking volunteers. Of the 500 CASA volunteers, only about 50 are bilingual.

And once the children enter the court system, most of the adults they come in contact with also speak only English — Child Protective Services staffers, judges, attorneys, counselors.

Oftentimes, the only one who does speak Spanish to them ends up being a CASA volunteer, like **Cynthia Hinojosa** or **Guillermo Marmol**.

Everything in these kids' world has changed, and it's all in English now, Hinojosa said.

"But this light comes on inside them and they smile when they realize you speak Spanish," she said.

"They become chatterboxes and open up. They must be thinking, 'This is a little piece of my life before everything went crazy.'"

That's critically important because the CASA volunteer must report back to the court on everything about the child, including schoolwork and foster care, so the court can decide what is in the best interests of the child.

"Normally, though, a pretty house with a white picket fence and two happy, friendly parents is not an available choice," Marmol said.

Frequently, however, the abuser is no longer around when the child returns to a parent. And the parent has gone through a year's worth of anger management or parenting classes and is in a far better position to care for the child.

Helping the court reach a decision can be very rewarding, both volunteers said. It's worth it to take the 30 hours of training required of all CASA volunteers.

For Marmol, it was a chance "to do something more than just look at a computer screen."

For Hinojosa, the chance to eliminate additional distress that many Latino families may go through because of a language difference appealed to her.

"A lot of times, these families are really scared," she said. "The relatives have no information about their nieces, nephews or grandkids and end up thinking they'll never see them again."

Sometimes, the child might speak English, but the parents or relatives do not, and the child served as their interpreter, said **Rebecca Rios Ten Doeschate**, a Dallas CASA supervisor.

Then how do you bring back normalcy into a child's life?

"Oftentimes," Rios said, "just showing up is our biggest role."

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