The past year brought a reminder that the more things change, the more they remain the same. What changed was the sheer number of Dallas County children removed from unsafe homes. The number of Dallas County children brought into the protective care of the state due to abuse or neglect increased a dramatic 31% compared to 2017. The total confirmed child victims in our community grew 15%, and the overall number of children living in foster care and other protective care placements increased 10%, while the Dallas County child population grew less than 1%.

As stunning as these statistics are, the occurrence of radical change also is what has remained the same. The child welfare system is subject to difficult-to-forecast, wide fluctuations based on changes in policies, practices, personnel, court decisions, laws and regulations. This “pattern” of unpredictable change is behind the title of Dallas CASA’s 2019 Strategic Plan: Meeting the Unmet, Ever-Changing Need. The plan is a road map identifying the resources and strategies that will allow us to meet ambitious goals that include serving every child in need and challenging the system to better serve our most at-risk children.

The certainty of change also is the ever-present reality for the vulnerable children we serve. Our child advocates meet that uncertainty with constancy, becoming that one adult who shows up in so many significant ways during a frightening time in a young life. Seeing beyond each child’s difficult circumstances, CASA volunteers recognize the promise and potential within each child.

At the end of 2018, Dallas CASA was serving 80% of Dallas County children living in foster care and other protective care placements. At the time of this publication, Dallas CASA was serving 89%. This 2018 Annual Impact Report is dedicated to the volunteers and supporters who make it possible for Dallas CASA to continue gaining significant ground even as the number of children who need us has grown exponentially. We could not do what we do without your generous and unwavering support.

With deepest gratitude,

Kathleen M. LaValle
President and Chief Executive Officer
SERVING the children

THE GROWING NEED IN DALLAS COUNTY

Confirmed Child Victims of Abuse

2018: 7,174  
2017: 6,242  
+15%

Children Living in Substitute Care

2018: 4,735  
2017: 4,319  
+10%

Children Removed from Homes

2018: 2,072  
2017: 1,580  
+31%

While the child population increased less than 1%, nearly three times as many children died from child abuse or neglect in 2018.

THE CHILDREN WE SERVE

AGE

- < 1: 7%  
- 1-2: 22%  
- 3-5: 20%  
- 6-9: 19%  
- 10-12: 11%  
- 13-15: 10%  
- 16-17: 6%  
- 18+: 5%

RACE

- African-American: 45%  
- Hispanic: 28%  
- Caucasian: 14%  
- Multi/Other: 12%

3,332 children served  
* 78.3% increase in 5 years

767,010 aggregate days of service to children by Dallas CASA volunteers  
* 92% increase over 5 years

CHILDREN SERVED

2018: 3,332  
2017: 3,118  
2016: 2,680  
2015: 2,264  
2014: 1,869  
2013: 1,380

TOTAL DAYS OF SERVICE

2018: 767,010  
2017: 672,601  
2016: 591,172  
2015: 485,893  
2014: 400,039  
2013: 300,039

<1% increase in child population
CELEBRATING our volunteer advocates

Dallas CASA celebrates all volunteer advocates who dedicate their time and talents to advocating for abused and neglected children in our community.

1,420 volunteers served abused and neglected children
- More than twice the number assigned five years ago

Diversity recruiting grant

Dallas CASA received a National CASA Local Urban Grant in the amount of $75,000 to support efforts to further diversify its volunteer ranks. During 2018, 106 new Hispanic, Latino and African-American volunteers were sworn in, nearly double the number five years ago.

Volunteer advocate training

Dallas CASA introduced a new volunteer preservice training curriculum in 2018, which included 24 hours of in-class training, plus online prework for each of the eight classes. Topics include trauma, mental health, cultural competency, poverty, substance abuse, domestic violence and advocating for older and LGBTQ youth.

NEW VOLUNTEERS SWORN IN

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VOLUNTEERS ASSIGNED

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PHOTO (above): One of 11 volunteer training classes sworn in during 2018. The Hon. Alice Rodriguez, Dallas County Associate Judge, 304th Juvenile District Court, presided.
Our volunteer advocates are committed to making a lasting impact on the abused and neglected children they serve.

CRISTINA AND MICHAEL SWARTZ came away from Dallas CASA’s Champion of Children Award Dinner three years ago knowing they were ready to be part of CASA. With full-time jobs and busy lives, the young married couple decided to work their cases together. They’ve found it is as helpful for emotional support as scheduling challenges. The Swartzes say it’s the children and their spirits that keep them going. “It’s a small sacrifice of time for us, and we have received so much gratitude and love in return,” Michael said. “It’s been even better because we get to enjoy it together.”

GABE MEADOWS is a jazz vocalist by night and marketing executive by day who fits child advocacy into every available moment. For Gabe, child advocacy isn’t a choice. “My father left when I was 10, and I grew up poor with my mom and six siblings in squalor in government housing,” he said. “I’ve been helped by so many along the way that I just don’t have a choice about giving back.” Gabe specializes in advocating for teenage boys. He listens to them, advocates for their best interests and tries to guide them. He stays in touch with regular phone calls and frequent visits. “My boys know I will go wherever they go. I will be there – whether it’s to fly, walk or skateboard to get there – until they are in a permanent home.”

LINDSAY EPSTEIN came to CASA armed with a college degree in family studies and a law degree, looking for a way to give back. She found Dallas CASA in 2012 and has been advocating for children ever since. She approaches each case with respect for all parties and a desire to stand up for children in need. “The way I see it is no matter what happens, I have done something to make the situation better,” Lindsay said. “It’s the children and their resiliency that keep me going.”

SCOTT MURPHY was attracted to Dallas CASA by the opportunity to make a real impact. He jumped in with both feet, taking on the case of a medically fragile child. Dallas CASA received a rare letter of commendation from a child psychologist who interacted with Scott at a medical appointment. “I have had many positive interactions with your CASA volunteers, but the level of commitment Scott has shown to this child and family is commendable.” For Scott, keeping the focus on one child has proven critical. He advocates for resources and services that allow children to heal and attends as many medical appointments as his schedule allows. “When you go to court and see how many cases the attorneys have and how many cases the CPS workers have, you realize the luxury of focusing on one case.”

SKY HARRISON’s journey with Dallas CASA began one night when she was eight years old and the police came to her apartment. Removed from her home, Sky was a terrified little girl in foster care when she first met her Dallas CASA advocate, Larry Dolan. As Sky tells it, Larry was the one who listened. He made visits happen with Sky’s four siblings and advocated for Sky to move to her aunt’s home. “I was ashamed, angry, embarrassed, confused, scared, lonely, guilty. Larry made things a little less scary, a little less awful.” Fifteen years later, Sky returned to Dallas CASA ready to serve children like her. She’s advocating for two teenagers and brings her special blend of real talk and warmth. “I hope I can show them being in foster care doesn’t have to define them.”
We recognize the following volunteer advocates who have generously served for five years or more.

MORE THAN 20 YEARS
Larry Dolan
Sandra Teter

16-20 YEARS
Margaret Duryee
Pamela Fletcher
Schenita Floyd
Nicole LeBoeuf
Tim Sexton
Alicia Wagoner

11-15 YEARS
Judy Cook
Sally Drayer
Samantha Durst
Corleen Helwig
Elizabeth Jenkins

6-10 YEARS
Deborah Ackerman
Erin Adams
Shamomica Alexander
Carla Aubrey
Laura Banse
Kay Bendor-Samuel
Fran Berg
Doug Bily
Sid Blache
Sarah Bogdon
Melina Bourland
Ann Marie Brink
Christie Bunch
Winnie Campagna
Sandy Capps
Julie Carbery
Michelle Chapman
Tracy Chesterham
Wathen Clark
Meredith Clinton
Sonya Coleman
Helena Cook
Adam DeSilver
Suzan Dick
Gloria Dixon
Kristie Dixon
Jennah Durant
Charles Dutschci
Rich Enthoven
Lindsay Epstein
Sherry Evans
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Lana Harder
Diane Hart
Ann Hoedger
Barbara Hobbs-McCulloch
Susan Hoover
Gerard Hudspeth
Enin Jesberger
Julie Johnson
Marag Johnson

30-39
21%
40-49
9%
50-59
23%
60+
23%

EDUCATION

High school/GED/Other 4%
Some college/Current student 9%
College degree 57%
Graduate degree 23%
Postgraduate degree 7%

OUR VOLUNTEER ADVOCATES
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Ginger Jordan
Katharine Kane
Laura Kelsoe
Audrey Labanowski
Lisa Lantz
Angelina LaPentiere
Carla Craig Latcher
Audrea Lemons
Prudence Lidbury
Kristin Long
Cherie Luckett
Barbora Madison
Margie Marek
Gail Marmol
Gil Marmol
Nancy Marston
Devona Mayneur
Dana McGrath
Tanya McKinney
Heather McNamara
Paige Merrett
Caroline Moore
Kristen Morrissey
Robyn Muller
Cynthia Peel
Harold Phillips
Denise Priebe

Ginger Jordan
Katharine Kane
Laura Kelsoe
Audrey Labanowski
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Dana McGrath
Tanya McKinney
Heather McNamara
Paige Merrett
Caroline Moore
Kristen Morrissey
Robyn Muller
Cynthia Peel
Harold Phillips
Denise Priebe

5 YEARS
Katherine Albritton
Sydney Allan
Janet Barter
Carol Blake
Dorothy Blome
Petri Brill
Jona Brosin
Ely Camacho
Bill Cannon
James Carter
Brenda Chatmon
Carla Clayton
Tish Cruciani
Cathy Cruz
Anna Lisa de Boisblanc
Kam Distaso
Valerie Doutte
Marcia Doolin
Stacee Dravas
Melissa Tyra
Judy Vanderburg
Cindy Warner
Holly Webster
Joseph Wilbert
Lisa Winkler

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SUPPORTING our growth

Growth and tenure of program staff

Since 2013, Dallas CASA increased the number of CASA program supervisors from 33 to 62. When fully ramped-up, a supervisor can manage up to 25 volunteers, allowing us to serve 65 additional children over the year. The 26 program staff members in place at the start of implementing an accelerated growth plan in 2013 currently have an average of 13 years of tenure at Dallas CASA.

88 Dallas CASA staff members ▶ 72.5% increase in five years

PHOTOS (clockwise from above): Staff at Dallas CASA holiday volunteer appreciation open house. ▶ Children’s Council president, Hannah May. ▶ Young Professionals Council members (left to right) Elise Nichols, Reasha Hedke, Annie Allred and Kelcey Hamilton. ▶ The Voices for a Cause benefit concert featured Ray Johnston (left), pictured with Mark Hiduke, presenting sponsor.

InCREASE in appointments from all Dallas County juvenile and family courts

Serving all children who need a Court Appointed Special Advocate requires the program capacity to remain open to accepting appointments from all nine Dallas County courts – two juvenile and seven family law courts – presiding over child welfare cases. Historically, Dallas CASA served primarily in the two Dallas County juvenile courts. During 2018, Dallas CASA continued its significant involvement in the juvenile courts while increasing the number of children served in cases pending before the Dallas County family courts. Compared to the prior year, the number of new children served in family court cases increased more than 100%, and the total number of children served in family court cases increased more than 70%.

Dallas CASA Children’s Council

The Dallas CASA Children’s Council continues to grow in membership, expanding its support of Dallas CASA in a variety of areas. Children’s Council members have the opportunity to participate in activities that recognize the work of volunteer advocates and support the children we serve, such as the annual volunteer appreciation party and the holiday gift drive. Volunteer opportunities for special events include the Comerica prom dress shopping event, Cherish the Children luncheon, Parade of Playhouses at NorthPark Center and National Adoption Day in Dallas.

DALLAS CASA CHILDREN’S COUNCIL BOARD

Hannah May
Eman Ahawri
Paulette Austin
Mary Lynn Bangs
Fran Berg
Cori Bray
Verees Brown
Wendy Bridges
Jana Brosin
Suzanne Bryan
Karen Carney
Jamiie Chatterton
Beth Cholerton
Darcy Cowell
Leigh Danley
Brooke Donelson
Sylvia Gray
Kelcy Hamilton
Dee Hartman
Reasha Hedke
Courtney Hogging
Sheila Irwin
Erin Jepberger
Doni Katterson
Aubrey
Labonowski
Megan Martinez
Jesilda Mayer
Kim Math
Audrey Moorehead
Victoria Nugent
Aparna Pillay
Erin Pope
Gina Porter
Jenny Reynolds
Jamie Roberts
Kristy Vogl
Robinson
Nicki Stafford
David Sprower
Lindsay Stengel
Jassilin Thibault
Leslie Wayne
Madison White
Reasha Hedke
Bart Howe
Kyle Laney
David McD Axoms
Cassie Moore
Elise Nichols
Lauren Quam
Ben Riemer
Ashley Sprawls
Megan Stenzell
Dana Swann
Molly Vought

Dallas CASA Young Professionals

The Dallas CASA Young Professionals is a vibrant group of volunteers who serve as an outreach, volunteer and fundraising arm for Dallas CASA. The Young Professionals increase awareness about abused children, while providing charitable and social opportunities for people ages 21 to 40 years. The group hosts the annual CASAbianca casino party and Voices for a Cause benefit concert, which have become top charitable events for philanthropic young professionals.

DALLAS CASA YOUNG PROFESSIONALS COUNCIL

PRESIDENT
Kenneth Wherry
Julia Bell
Tori Brunelli
Bela Coskey
David Dancer
Grace Davis
Tara Dwyre
Reasha Hedke
Bart Howe
Kyle Laney
David McD Axoms
Cassie Moore
Elise Nichols
Lauren Quam
Ben Riemer
Ashley Sprawls
Megan Stenzell
Dana Swann
Molly Vought
Friends of Dallas CASA

THE HON. MIKE CANTRELL retired from the Dallas County Commissioners Court at the end of 2018 after a long and impressive career of public service during which he was a steadfast and strong supporter of Dallas CASA. Commissioner Cantrell was active in many initiatives impacting families and children in our community. Dallas CASA honored Commissioner Cantrell with a special recognition award at its 2017 Champion of Children award dinner.

Dallas CASA mourned the loss of a dear friend to our community and to Dallas CASA, CAROLINE ROSE HUNT. Mrs. Hunt was drawn to the mission of Dallas CASA because she had a wonderful childhood and felt deeply for vulnerable children who do not. Her legacy of compassion and service to others will live on. Dallas CASA was grateful to be selected by Mrs. Hunt prior to her death as one of two nonprofit beneficiaries of donations made in her memory.

PHOTOS [clockwise from above]: Dallas County Commissioners, Theresa Daniel, Mike Cantrell, Judge Clay Jenkins, John Wiley Price and Erika Garza. Judge Cheryl Lee Shannon accepting her award at Cherish the Children. Meadows Foundation President and CEO Linda Perryman Evans accepted the Champion of Children Award from Honorary Chairs, Trevor and Jan Rees-Jones. Champion of Children Award Dinner co-chairs, Jeff Rich and Jan Miller, Paul Coggins and Regina Montoya, and Chase and Bela Cooley. Cherish the Children co-chairs Erin Jesberger and Aubrey Labinowski with luncheon speaker Anthony Trucks. Caroline Rose Hunt, a longtime friend of Dallas CASA.

HONORING our friends

Judge Barefoot Sanders Champion of Children Award Honoree

Dallas CASA was proud to honor The Meadows Foundation with the prestigious Judge Barefoot Sanders Champion of Children Award. Established 70 years ago by Algur H. and Virginia Meadows and led by three generations of Meadows family members, The Meadows Foundation has transformed institutions and nonprofits across the state. Through grant support of Dallas CASA dating back 20 years, the foundation has directly impacted the lives of thousands of children, providing them with caring, constant advocates by their sides. The foundation, under the leadership of President and Chief Executive Officer Linda Perryman Evans, has supported CASA programs across the state, as well as many other nonprofits and institutions focused on early childhood education, health services for children and strengthening families.

Caroline Rose Hunt Cherish the Children Award Honoree

Judge Cheryl Lee Shannon was awarded the 2018 Caroline Rose Hunt Cherish the Children Award in recognition of her leadership in our community and dedication to serving child victims and at-risk youth. As the presiding judge of the 305th District Court in Dallas County, Judge Shannon hears juvenile delinquency and child abuse and neglect cases. She also serves as chair of the Dallas County Juvenile Board, is a member of the State Bar of Texas Juvenile Justice Committee, and was appointed by the Supreme Court of Texas to serve on the Judicial Commission for Youth, Children and Families. She formerly served as a board member for the Texas Supreme Court Task Force on Foster Care and on numerous community committees relating to youth issues.
THANKING our supporters

Dallas CASA Classic

The annual collaboration of AT&T, Goldman Sachs and Pioneer Natural Resources for the 21st Dallas CASA Classic golf tournament led to the highest level of tournament sponsorships. The hosts presented a check to Dallas CASA for $1.7 million. Since its inception, the Dallas CASA Classic has raised $17.9 million for Dallas CASA, allowing the agency to grow from serving 407 children annually in 1998 to serving 3,332 children in 2018. Held simultaneously at Brookhaven Country Club and the Four Seasons Resort and Club Dallas, the tournament is the largest single-day, non-PGA golf fundraiser, drawing nearly 700 golfers from around the country.

To view the video celebrating the 22nd annual golf tournament, click HERE.

Philanthropist Lyda Hill surprises Dallas CASA with $110,000 infrastructure grant

Dallas CASA was invited, along with 19 other nonprofit agencies, to attend what they thought was a “pitch day” for Lyda Hill Philanthropies. All were surprised and thrilled to discover $110,000 checks taped underneath their chairs. The $2.2 million distribution was designated to support infrastructure and discretionary needs for each of the 20 charities. Lyda Hill Philanthropies recognized that nonprofits cannot do their work if they are not adequately resourced. The funds allowed Dallas CASA to upgrade the security of its systems and databases, improve the efficiency of work done at and away from its building through technological enhancements, and upgrade the audio-visual equipment critical to quality trainings and meetings for volunteers, staff and visitors.

Texas Governor awards grant for human trafficking victim advocacy curriculum

Dallas CASA received a $61,000 grant from Texas Gov. Greg Abbott’s office to create a pilot training program that will educate Dallas CASA volunteers on advocating for victims of sex trafficking, a growing threat to the safety of children and teens, particularly those in foster care. Dallas CASA will collaborate with California-based Saving Innocence to create a training curriculum customized for CASA volunteers. After completing the specialized training, volunteers will be able to identify signs of sex trafficking, educate the youth they are appointed to serve on the risk factors and ultimately make more informed recommendations to judges, allowing minor victims of sexual assault to receive appropriate therapeutic services.

Skills-Based Volunteer Projects

FIDELITY INVESTMENTS

For a second project in the past three years in support of Dallas CASA, Fidelity Investments provided funding and information technology experts who volunteered their time to help select and implement an automated expense reporting software for CASA staff. The software includes web and mobile applications, scanned receipt and expense report submission for approval, electronic payment processing and integration with CASA’s financial reporting database software. The software significantly improves the administrative efficiency of staff, allowing more time for child-serving responsibilities.

CITI

Dallas CASA was invited to a Pro Bono Tech & Business Consulting event hosted for Citi by NPower, an organization that connects volunteers from the technology community who help build technological skills and improve internal processes. Dallas CASA was matched with skilled CITI volunteers to assess CASA’s vulnerability and recovery if faced with a disaster. Dallas CASA’s finance and administration staff learned about the elements of an effective disaster and recovery process and created a roadmap to establish a plan to minimize damage and speed recovery from disasters.

SCHWAB PRO BONO CHALLENGE

Common Impact partnered with Charles Schwab for the Schwab Pro Bono Challenge, a program that helps nonprofits address a wide range of organizational challenges. Dallas CASA’s commitment to serving more children means hiring additional professional staff as volunteer supervisors and creating Team Lead positions that manage supervisors. Schwab personnel created resources to support leadership development for these staff to help them with communications and feedback, servant leadership principles and other management skills.
THANKING OUR SUPPORTERS

CORPORATIONS, FOUNDATIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS
Voices of Hope Sustaining Members* are identified in bold type

CHAMPION ($30,000 AND ABOVE)

Anonymous
A&T
capital for Kids
Citi
Crest Cadillac / Crest Infiniti
ExxonMobil
Flotek Industries
The Gaudin Family

Guardian ($15,000-$29,999)

Alliance Residential Holdings, LLC
Anonymous
Arent Fox LLP
Asset Valuation & Marketing, Inc.
Bank of America
Black & Veatch
CBRE
Ciena
Clariant
Clear Capital
Cleary, Gottlieb, Steen & Hamilton LLP
Computershare Loan Services
Dawson Geophysical Company
Deloitte
Eastdil Secured
Eckert Seamans Cherin & Mell A LLP
Elizabeth Toon Charities
Emerson Automation Solutions
Ensign US Southern Drilling LLC
Estate of Quinn Laukel
FB Industries Inc.
General Dynamics
Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher LLP
Goldberg Kahn Ltd.

Goldman Sachs
Greystar
Hamilton Charitable Foundation
The Hirsch Family Foundation
Jim Thompson Foundation
Joe M. & Doris R. Dealey Foundation
Gyan Family Foundation
Kappa Alpha Theta Beta Sigma Chapter
Northwood Woman’s Club
PPF Industries
Pioneer Natural Resources
The Rees-Jones Foundation
State Farm Insurance
Valentine Family Foundation
Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher LLP

PROTECTOR ($10,000-$14,999)

Alvarez & Marsal Business Consulting, LLC
The Baldridge Foundation
Baton Valves Corporation
BP Global Oil Trading
Browcewell LLP
Bud’s Salads
Caron Transportation Systems
Credit Suisse
DistributionNOW
Energy Transfer
Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver & Jacobson LLP
Halliburton
John Platt Company, Inc.
JPMorgan Chase Bank
Locke Lord LLP

DEFENDER ($7,500-$9,999)

Coditis & Associates, PC
Dycom Industries
Finning Caterpillar
Pilion Foundation

ADVOCATE ($5,000-$7,499)

Accelerate Resources
Aon Corporation
Comerica Bank
Crescent Communities
Cushman & Wakefield
Dallas Claims Association, Inc.
Deadline Logistics
DLA Piper LLP
Ericsson Inc.

OPTIONS FOUNDATION

Foss Family Foundation
Harry S. Moss Foundation
Hunton Andrews Kurth LLP
Institutional Property Advisors
Interstate Batteries
Maverick Capital Foundation
McBryde, Sullivan & Miller LLP
Meade, Collet, Reid, Cousins, Crouch & Ungerman, L.L.P
M.B. & Edna Zale Foundation
Mccollum Law Firm, PC
Network for Good
Oberheiden, PC
Occidental Petroleum
OmniTRAX
Patrick & Beatrice Haggerty Foundation
Platinum Pipe Rentals
Quorum Business Solutions, Inc.
Rush Enterprises
Salient
Select Energy Services
Singh Family Foundation
Stone Transport
Sun Coast Resources Inc.
Tronchip/MNC
Weil, M Itz & needle Foundation

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Dallas CASA VOICES of HOPE

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THANKING OUR SUPPORTERS

DALLAS CASA

Voices of Hope Sustaining Members* are identified in bold type

Individuals
Janice Z. and Richard Davis
Cynthia C. Comparin
Kimberly and Joe Colonnetta
Mike Bryant
Anonymous
Suzanne McCarron and Bob Andrews

Protectors ($5,000–$9,999)
Suzanne and John Gibson
Lisa and Clay Cooley
Fran and Mark S. Berg

Guardian ($10,000–$24,999)
Mark Hiduke
Peggy Dear

Champion ($25,000 and above)
Caroline Rose Hunt
Becky and Jim Lozier
Deborah Ackerman and John Lozier
Stephen B.L. Penrose
Christine and Joe Poppolo

Advocate ($1,000–$2,499)
Leilann Braga

Defender ($2,500–$4,999)
Sharon and Brian Ainsworth
Leesa and Gary Alhadeff
Christine and Jonathan Bassham
Beth Caswell
Barbara and Bennett Carvin
Kathy and James Clark
Dobby and Hugh Comer
Blais and Chase Cooley
Sue and Al DiRestitosa
Clint Duncon
Ricki and Randall Elmar
Laura Elgiel

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2018 revenue excludes contributions fulfilling pledges to the capital and growth fund campaign that concluded successfully in December 2015.

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Because of the Dallas CASA board of directors’ effective leadership and vision, Dallas CASA was serving four out of five children in protective care at the end of the year. With a vision to serve every child removed from an unsafe home, the board continues to engage the community, corporations and stakeholders to ensure Dallas CASA’s ongoing growth and effectiveness. CASA board members consistently support and represent the agency at all fundraising, outreach and volunteer events to expand the community’s involvement with Dallas CASA.
Foster kids cannot wait for Texas to fight a court order to protect their safety

Billboards for Dallas CASA, or Court Appointed Special Advocates, carry the message “Abused Children Can’t Wait.”

The statement echoes the message Nobel Prize-winning Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral powerfully delivered: “We are guilty of many errors and many faults, but our worst crime is abandoning the children, neglecting the fountain of life. Many of the things we need can wait. The child cannot. Right now is the time his bones are being formed, his blood is being made, and his senses are being developed.”

A federal lawsuit litigating the rights of Texas children in foster care is now in its seventh year. In a December 2015 order, U.S. District Judge Janis Jack determined that the Texas foster care system denies children in long-term foster care their constitutional right to be free from unreasonable risk of harm. Teens and young adults testified at trial to devastating physical and emotional injuries and repeated sexual assaults. The record includes evidence of barriers to reporting abuse, failures to investigate allegations of abuse, inadequate numbers of appropriate placement options, unreasonable caseloads of caseworkers, insufficient regular contacts with children, and the lack of current, accurate documentation accessible to key stakeholders.

Last week Judge Jack released her order specifying the remedial steps and policies the state must implement, with progress to be monitored and reported back periodically. The 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals issued an administrative stay of the order to allow time to address the question of whether Judge Jack’s order should be stayed pending the outcome of an appeal. In the year or longer before a ruling on the merits of the appeal, so many Texas children will be impacted. At the end of last year, 2,680 Dallas County children were living in substitute care as wards of the state.

The children whose safety is the subject of the pending federal lawsuit cannot wait for appeals to be decided. Ongoing litigation of any kind can delay progress toward improving what led to the fight in the first place. Litigators worry that improvements voluntarily undertaken may weaken their arguments, supporting claims that the requested relief is unwarranted, too burdensome or unrealistic. Also, progress made since the trial ended may be inadequately credited while litigation remains pending. For these reasons, we should encourage and commend any efforts being undertaken to come to a mediated solution, identifying the critical changes and improvements that will be made and setting a definite time table for completion.

Grown-ups may be equipped to live with the uncertainty, the wait and the expense of ongoing litigation. But uncertainty is different for a child, especially when the unknown is accompanied by fear. As for waiting, time passes so slowly for a child, even in anticipation of happy occasions. For a child in foster care, the waiting is coupled with not knowing when the next placement change will happen and how long it will be before separated siblings will see one another. And we know the expense to a child who may be exposed to health and safety risks while living in long-term protective care cannot be measured in dollars or absorbed in a fiscal year.

Regardless of whether litigation continues to the bitter end, community members who agree child victims cannot wait can be part of a broader solution today. We all can commit to reporting suspected child abuse or neglect. Some also may be called to become foster parents. If fostering is not an option for you, please consider joining the ranks of more than 1,300 community members who were court-appointed last year as Dallas CASA volunteer advocates. Trained and supported by professional staff, CASA volunteers frequently are the most constant adults in the lives of children in foster care.


The lawsuit remains pending with challenges to ordered remedies continuing.
Images used are not of actual children in foster care.