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What's in store for North Texas foster kids as CPS turns them over to a private contractor

As Austin continues to privatize services, it's a good thing Dallas CASA is still on hand for these vulnerable children.



Volunteer advocate Cené Griffin (left) speaks with CASA supervisor Ashley Peres at Dallas CASA's office. Griffin played a key role in getting a foster child adopted in November. (Eliás Valverde II / Staff Photographer)

By [Sharon Grigsby](#)

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Lord knows the children [in this state's hopelessly overwhelmed foster care system](#) have endured more upheaval and disruption than most of us adults will see in our entire lifetimes.

Now I bring news of a dramatic but under-the-radar change that affects all North Texas kids stuck in a system that can ruin young lives while rescuing many others.

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Beginning March 1, under the banner of community-based care, the state will retain oversight but turn over most of its responsibilities for abused and neglected North Texas children to a nonprofit contractor. This third-party already has taken charge of finding homes for kids in the foster system, and its staff will now take over supervision of their cases.

The move marks the privatization of foster care work previously done by the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. If that sentence leaves you queasy, I get it. The history of transferring government services to private control is, at best, a mixed bag.

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Who knows whether this latest venture, the most dramatic stage of a rollout that began locally in September, will prove to be another failure — or a step toward turning the woeful foster care system around.

Thank goodness one trustworthy entity remains in place: The volunteers and staff at [Dallas CASA](#) (Court Appointed Special Advocates), who can be counted on to make the best of this latest upheaval.

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The state's Child Protective Services places youngsters in foster care after physical or sexual abuse, abandonment or severe neglect in their own homes. Overnight, and often with only a few belongings shoved into a plastic bag or two, [these kids lose everything familiar](#) — home, family, friends and school.

Dallas CASA volunteers walk alongside the county's foster children, no matter how great the chaos. The advocate is often the only constant in the youngster's life.

With a cast of many new adults coming on board, the stability and continuity the advocates provide will be more important than ever.

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The system changes, rooted in an overhaul of foster care [ordered by Texas lawmakers in 2017](#), have slowly been implemented, region by region across the state, as nonprofit vendors are vetted and hired.

The child care collaborative [EMPOWER](#), based in Irving, is the nonprofit selected for the nine-county Metro East region of Dallas, Collin, Rockwall, Hunt, Kaufman, Ellis, Grayson, Fannin and Navarro counties. Ours will be the region with the most children being served in Texas.

CASA leaders are cautiously optimistic about the overhaul. The new model's aim is to keep children closer to their hometown and perhaps even in their same school. It is designed to cut down on bureaucracy, allow for more collaboration among local groups and build better connections for nearby placement. The state retains conservatorship of all the children.

About 1,250 Dallas County children are in substitute care on any given day. Only 40% of them currently find placement in foster homes within the county.

Kathleen LaValle, Dallas CASA president and CEO, told me she hopes “the more localized operation will bring a shared sense of responsibility for the welfare of the children who are in our system.”

Dallas CASA served a total of 2,151 children in 2023. For the past five years, the organization has been able to accept 100% of Dallas County foster child appointments, serving more than 7,000 children in that time.

As the state offloads foster care to nonprofits, most CPS caseworkers have the option to transfer to those operations. Many end up in new roles or opt out over concerns about benefits and pay. As the start date nears for the Metro East region, CASA already has seen an increased turnover in CPS staff assigned to Dallas County cases.

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This piece of art, entitled "Terms of Service," hangs in the training room of CASA headquarters. It is the work of Dallas CASA supervisor and former foster child Jackie "Juba" Davis and was purchased by a retired Dallas CASA supervisor and donated to Dallas CASA. (Elias Valverde II / Staff Photographer)

When it comes to the history of the foster children and their families, LaValle said, CASA volunteers will be key to helping EMPOWER staff get up to speed. "We have to be absolutely laser-focused on not letting the needs of that child fall between the cracks during this transition," she said.

Ben Wilkins, Dallas CASA's chief program officer, also sees the critical role his organization will play in making the new model successful.

"No matter how much we embrace and support community-based care, there's going to be an enormous amount of change," he said. "Somebody has to be there for that child and keep that information going."

You only have to hear one child's story to appreciate how the upcoming changes might, at least in the short term, further disrupt the life of a foster child.

CASA volunteer Cené Griffin was court-appointed to her first Dallas County case in 2019. Children's identities are held in confidence, so she and I agreed she would refer to him as Danny. He was 12 when they met.

For four years, Griffin stuck with Danny as family after family leaned toward adoption then had a change of heart. More often than not, Danny's lack of interest in school became too big a challenge for his prospective parents.

Repeatedly, Griffin sprang into action to help the adults, as well as Danny, through difficulties. No matter how deflated she was when a placement didn't work out, Griffin remained hopeful the right home would come along.

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A busy professional as well as tireless CASA volunteer, Griffin wrote prominently on her vision board: "Get Danny adopted!" She never missed a visit with him.

Like all the children for whom CASA advocates, Danny had endured a lot of trauma and tragedy. Every new family meant change — especially the whiplash of differences in expectations.

"The adults would see a 13- or 14-year-old boy," Griffin told me. "I needed to help them understand what's underneath. How that affects the decisions he makes and his actions."



CASA volunteer Cené Griffin pictured outside the Dallas CASA office. Griffin never lost faith she would help find an adoptive home for the young teen in her first case. (Eliás Valverde II / Staff Photographer)

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Danny found his forever family in the fourth placement and, at age 16, was officially adopted in November. When the judge allowed Danny to tap the gavel to signify the case was over, Griffin recalled, everyone in the courtroom was teary-eyed.

“He has this new sense of hope,” said Griffin, who still visits Danny regularly. “He knows that he’s loved.”

Danny’s happy ending was largely due to Griffin knowing the history of his case and thus being able to start tough but necessary conversations along the way.

“No path is ever linear on any of these cases,” CASA supervisor Ashley Peres, whose team of advocates includes Griffin, told me. “There are lots of detours.”

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Peres also noted that the upcoming change will happen at a critical time in the school year. “A new caseworker might be amazing,” she said, “but still have to get up to speed. At the same time a kid risks not passing their current grade.”

Repeatedly in our conversations, the CASA staff returned to one refrain: This isn’t a transition that will be accomplished in weeks or even a few months.

Under the best scenario, the handoff from the state to EMPOWER will be a rocky road. Dallas County is lucky to have CASA and volunteers like Griffin to help smooth the way.

“CASA advocates aren’t afraid of this change,” Griffin said. “We can’t afford to be. We have to remain a beacon of hope for these children.”

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To learn more about becoming a Dallas CASA volunteer, visit dallascasa.org.



[Sharon Grigsby](#), As the DMN City Columnist and a fourth-generation Texan, I'm focused on all things Dallas. I made what I expected to be a short career stopover here in 1980 and, this many years later, I'm still working to make Dallas a better city for all its residents. You'll also find me writing about mental health care and substance abuse issues.

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