

# OPINION

## GUEST VIEWPOINT

# Young crime victims all deserve an advocate

By LISA KORTH  
AND ANNE SHARMAN

**A**n 8-year-old girl diagnosed with autism resides in her third foster home. She was abused sexually by a family member and witnessed domestic violence. Does this young girl deserve a Court Appointed Special Advocate to ensure that her needs are met?

A brother and sister, ages 10 and 13, are removed from their home. Both parents are addicted to drugs, and the children routinely woke to find strangers sleeping in their home.

The children were malnourished and have endured untreated medical problems. Neither child has been to school regularly, and both have fallen behind their peers academically.

Do these children deserve a voice in court that represents their best interests?

Three young boys — ages 1, 3 and 4 — have observed their mother abusing drugs and alcohol. Their father is in prison, and the children have been left with strangers to facilitate their mother's choices.

When they were taken into

custody, the caseworker found the house strewn with dirty diapers and rotting food. Do these little ones merit the care and concern of a volunteer who will ensure that they are safe and well cared for in foster care?

What if you had only one volunteer available to advocate for one child or group of siblings? How would you choose who most needs a court appointed advocate?

These stories are adapted from real case files in the Lane County CASA waiting list. Lane County has nearly 1,000 children in its foster care system, but CASA has the volunteers and financial resources to serve only 330 of them.

CASA staff members regularly face the difficult decision of assigning volunteers to the most egregious cases, leaving many deserving children without the aid of an advocate.

Why are CASA volunteers so important? Advocate-volunteers provide a powerful voice in court for abused and neglected children. They investigate, examine and recommend to the juvenile judge the best option for a safe and permanent home for

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the children assigned to them.

Advocate-volunteers spend most of their time interviewing the adults involved in each case — including teachers, foster parents, attorneys, caseworkers, counselors, parents, medical professionals and family members — to determine the facts and circumstances of the child's situation.

Advocate-volunteers are ordinary people who are passionate about the health and welfare of children. Professionals, stay-at-home parents and retirees are among the many types of people who volunteer as advocates. On average, each case lasts two years and requires about 10 to 15 volunteer hours per month.

Research indicates that children in the foster care system

who receive the support of an advocate-volunteer are less than half as likely to re-enter foster care because of future abuse. These children are more likely to be adopted or return home than to languish in permanent foster care.

They move out of foster care an average of eight months faster than children who do not have an advocate-volunteer.

In short, having an advocate-volunteer gives a child a far greater chance at leaving foster care and finding a safe, permanent home.

Today, CASA has 400 children on its waiting list. The organization's goal is to bring that number to zero within the next five years.

To accomplish this bold goal, CASA aims to recruit and train 60 new advocate-volunteers and increase fundraising by \$30,000 to support these volunteers this year.

At the same time, CASA of Lane County has begun to assign seasoned, specially trained volunteers to coach other volunteers in a new "peer coordinator" model that is being watched by CASA programs around the

country. This new model ultimately will reduce costs by 40 percent per child and make it possible to give a voice to every child without a significant increase in paid staff.

So, back to the original question: Which child would you choose to receive the aid of an advocate-volunteer?

The only answer is: No one should have to choose. Children in the foster care system are the most vulnerable among us and all foster children deserve the support that only an advocate-volunteer can provide.

Please consider volunteering so that no one has to choose one child in need of an advocate-volunteer over another.

For more information visit [www.casa-lane.org/volunteering](http://www.casa-lane.org/volunteering) or call 541-984-3132.

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*Lisa Korth of Eugene is the board president of Court Appointed Special Advocates of Lane County. Anne Sharman of Eugene worked as an advocate-volunteer in Boston and now serves on CASA of Lane County's Development Committee and the CASA Leaders Forum.*