



CASA seeks volunteers for January class

By April M. Havens

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PASCAGOULA, Miss. -- Jackson County's Court Appointed Special Advocates for children is seeking new volunteers to begin training in its January class, organization leaders said.

CASA is an organization that takes on cases of abused and neglected children and acts as an extra set of eyes and ears for the Jackson County Youth Court.

Volunteers spend time with the children, their families and others, and make recommendations for the child in court.

The organization now has 40 volunteers, according to Brenda Ramsey, volunteer coordinator. About 30 of those are handling cases, she said, and the others are Friends of CASA, a group that helps the organization in other ways.

"The volunteers are absolutely critical to the program," Ramsey said. "If we don't have enough volunteers, we're not able to take the cases the judge assigns us and we can't serve the children. Most of our current volunteers already have a full caseload."

New volunteers must complete a rigorous 30-hour training period before taking cases. Training will begin Jan. 14.

Classes take place on four Thursday nights and two Saturdays and include volunteer panels, guest speakers, and some homework, Ramsey said.

Prospective volunteers should be "dedicated advocates who are willing to have an open heart and a sense of objectivity," CASA Executive Director Frances Allsup said.

"It is a program where you get to make a difference in so many peoples' lives," Allsup said. "The impact is astounding. And even though our goal would be that CASA wouldn't be needed anymore, the blessings are endless."

Ramsey, who has two open cases, said she was especially touched when she helped reunite a mother with her young son.

"I got a firsthand view of the way the mother interacted with her child," Ramsey said. "The mother really did love him, and she really tried to do what the court said. It was really rewarding for me to watch them interact, and it's always heartwarming to see them go home."

CASA's first goal is to reunify the family, but in some cases that is not possible.

"I had one volunteer who was very upset by what she recommended in the courtroom," Allsup said. "But I



CASA volunteer Laura Taylor, left, and volunteer coordinator Brenda Ramsey, right, prepare Christmas packages and stockings for children in the program.

just put my arm around her and said, 'Even though what you did was really hard, you stopped the cycle. You tried to bond that family, but you had to stop that cycle of abuse.'"

Organizers say volunteers spend roughly 10 hours a month on cases, but Allsup said her group goes above and beyond.

By year's end, Jackson County's CASA volunteers will have logged more than 11,000 hours, Allsup said.

"This is the most amazing family of advocates," she said.

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