



# Biennial Report

January 2023

**KENTUCKY CASA NETWORK, INC.**

**CHANGE A  
CHILD'S STORY.™**





## INTRODUCTION

Kentucky CASA Network, Inc. (KCN) is the state Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) association as described in Kentucky Revised Statute (KRS) 620.530(1). CASA advocates are trained community volunteers appointed by judges to represent the best interests of dependent, abused, and neglected children in court (KRS 620.500 et seq.). Local CASA programs are nonprofit organizations that train and supervise CASA volunteers. There are currently 22 local CASA programs and more than 1,230 volunteers across Kentucky.

As the state association, the KCN is directed by statute to provide certain evaluations and recommendations relating to child welfare to the Supreme Court, Governor, Legislative Research Commission, and Cabinet for Health and Family Services in the odd-numbered years. Specifically, KRS 620.535(3) requires the state association to “evaluate and make recommendations” regarding:

- a. Laws of the Commonwealth and practices, policies, and procedures within the Commonwealth affecting the welfare of children and families; and
- b. The effectiveness, or lack thereof, and the reasons therefore, of local CASA volunteers advocating for placement for the children in the Commonwealth.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND OBSERVATIONS FOR POLICY REFORM AND IMPROVED EFFICIENCIES IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM IN KENTUCKY

### I. Lack of availability of appropriate foster care and residential facility placements

*Evaluation:* CASA programs report an alarming lack of placements for children, resulting in a significant increase in children being placed outside of their counties. CASA volunteers and staff shared examples of children receiving multiple statewide rejections for placements, and DCBS workers “begging” placements to accept children. Volunteers are observing increases in the number of children being placed out of state as a result of the placement crisis in Kentucky. If able to be placed within Kentucky, many children are placed increasingly far from their homes of origin. These long-distance placements are resulting in gaps in services for those children. In some instances, CASA program staff report that children are going over a year without a face-to-face visit from a DCBS social worker. CASA volunteers make every effort to continue face-to-face visits with children despite the distance; one CASA program reported more than doubling its miles driven by volunteers from 2021 to 2022. However, given the nature of the volunteer role, not all volunteers can commit to driving several hours each way for monthly visits with children, resulting in volunteer retention challenges for CASA programs. Even for children

for whom a foster home is found, increasingly, CASA volunteers are observing that the placements do not meet their needs – seemingly a result of the state being desperate to place children with families. For example, children with significant behavioral concerns are being placed with children who are more likely to trigger those behavioral issues, and children with high needs are being placed in first-time foster homes not yet experienced enough to meet complex needs. Some programs report that PCC placements, although theoretically positioned to provide therapeutic environments for high need children, are also too short staffed to appropriately equip foster homes to support the children placed with them.

Recommendations: The state should review how foster parents and homes are being selected, assess the modality and content of their initial training and onboarding, and evaluate and potentially increase the support offered to existing foster placements. Efforts should be made to increase kinship and fictive kin placements without creating the requirement of becoming a DCBS foster home provider. There may be potential relative placements available who decide against accepting children because they need financial reimbursement but are overwhelmed by the time and administrative burdens of becoming DCBS foster placements. The legislature should consider reinstating financial compensation for kinship and fictive kin placements as a solution to the lack of foster care placements.

## **II. Child welfare worker shortage**

Evaluation: CASA volunteers report extremely high frustration levels related to the social worker shortage and frequency of staff turnover. This increased frustration has become a burdensome volunteer management and retention issue for local CASA programs. Most notably, though, volunteers are observing the impact of this staffing crisis on abused and neglected children. Because a case's assigned social worker is frequently changing and the current social workers are so overburdened, CASA volunteers are taking on extra duties that the Cabinet is not able to accomplish. While CASA volunteers do not shy away from stepping up to prevent a child's needs from falling through the cracks, the extent to which this is happening clearly shows the continued impact of the DCBS staffing shortage. CASA volunteers across multiple counties report personally transferring a child's belongings from a former placement to a new placement; many volunteers are physically obtaining documentation vital to the case plan and/or well-being of the child when a social worker was unable or delayed in doing so; they are often communicating with prior and current placements to ensure a child's medications are appropriately transferred; and volunteers are ensuring various components of a child's treatment plans and services do not lapse when placements disrupt. These are all duties that typically fall within the scope of a DCBS case worker. Because CASA is not present in every county, and counties with CASA programs are only assigned a proportion of overall DNA cases, the extent to which children's needs are being addressed on the remaining cases is unknown.

Recommendations: The Cabinet and legislature are well aware of the staffing crisis within DCBS and are to be commended for increasing social worker salaries. While hiring and retention challenges take time to resolve, abused and neglected children continue to be impacted daily by these issues. In addition to the existing hiring and retention efforts, the KCN recommends exploring opportunities to recruit former,

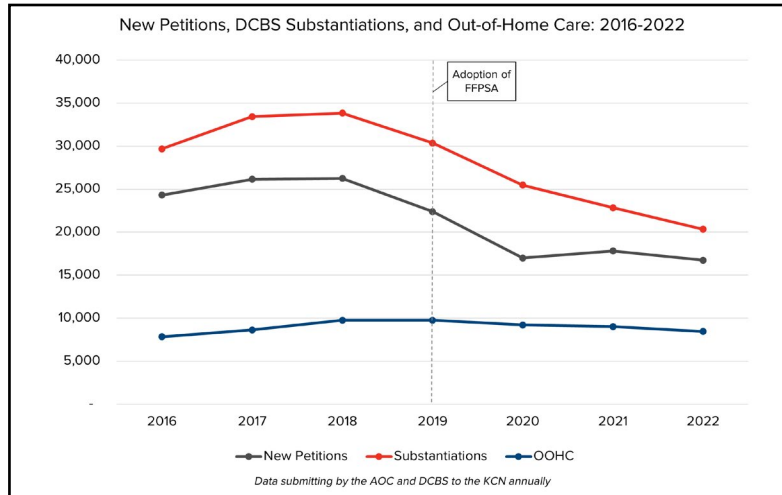
experienced workers who left either due to the previous lower pay or because they were eligible for retirement. Given the staffing crisis, the state could consider a temporary exception that would allow former DCBS staff receiving state retirement to be compensated on a short-term basis as temporary workers, until other hiring initiatives increase the staffing levels. DCBS should also continue to explore and utilize sign-on and retention bonuses to increase applications and long-term employment. A graduated incentive plan could provide funding for six months, one year, and two years to retain workers. Additionally, the Cabinet should continue to evaluate hiring criteria so that applicants with non-preferred degrees, but commensurate experience can be hired.

### **III. Lack of access and wait times for court-ordered services**

*Evaluation:* CASA programs continue to observe a pervasive lack of or delay in delivery of both court-ordered assessments and services. The details of these access challenges vary by region; however, providers in both urban and rural communities are experiencing unsustainably long waiting lists. (In many rural communities, court orders often refer families to the same overwhelmed provider. Urban areas have more providers but still cannot keep up with the demand for services.)

Delays in accessing evaluations and services results in delays on DNA cases, thereby delaying permanency for abused and neglected children. For example, in some cases it has taken months for a parental capacity assessment to be completed and results reported to the court, leaving the case in limbo related to placement and case planning. Waiting months (or in some cases over a year) for quality mental health services prolongs cases but also directly impacts the well-being of the children. Many programs share alarming examples of barriers to accessing quality assessments and services ordered by the court. Examples include: a community having no single provider able to assess teenagers for substance abuse; a provider charging an individual \$900 for anger management classes; court-ordered drug testing requiring the individual to drive an hour away; parenting classes which utilize 15-20 year old VHS tapes as their method of instruction; a Spanish-speaking child with an extensive trauma history waiting months only to finally be removed from a waitlist because a Spanish-speaking trauma therapist was not available.

CASA programs across the state report lengthy waitlists for in-home services ranging from six weeks to 18 months. Although Kentucky was an early adopter of the Family First Prevention Services Act, CASA volunteers continue to observe that families are either waiting too long for these vital services aimed at supporting safe reunification, or the services are not happening at all. While reports to DCBS and substantiations have trended downward over the past three years, it should be noted that the number of children in out of home care is not declining at that same pace. See the chart on the following page. These court-involved children and families are in dire need of intensive services to support safety and permanency.



Recommendations:

- A. The KCN hopes the Upstream initiative being implemented by the Judicial Commission on Mental Health will utilize the community mapping process to identify the most significant gaps in services across the Commonwealth. A comprehensive assessment of services will include not only what services exist in each community, but whether they are accessible (factoring in both distance/ transportation required and length of waiting lists) and, even more importantly, whether they provide high quality services. Prioritization to better support and expand the service provider networks in communities across the state should be front of mind by the courts, DCBS, and the legislature. The courts and DCBS should evaluate the availability and quality of providers before continuing to order families to utilize them for assessments and services. Issuing orders without the availability or access to services only delays permanency for children.
- B. FFPSA implementation and prevention services are crucial for Kentucky’s children, however, it is clear that many families are still coming before the courts and the delays and service access issues have created a crisis that needs to be addressed immediately. Family First implementation and infrastructure should be continually re-evaluated given the service provider community being so spread thin and the reports that reunification and in-home services are so difficult to access.

## ON THE HORIZON - WHAT CASA IS FOLLOWING

### I. Agency representation model in the dependency, neglect, and abuse docket

In partnership with the AOC and Kentucky Youth Advocates, the Cabinet for Health and Family Services is looking to develop a pilot in 2023 that would provide for the Office of Legal Services to take over the role of the county attorney in prosecuting cases in the dependency, neglect, and abuse docket in family and district court. The Cabinet will look at this model in up to ten possible counties in 2023 without any needed shift in resources. The impetus for this pilot is to examine if there can be a more collaborative model for the DCBS case worker in court. This would allow for the Cabinet attorney to gain more knowledge of the case and to have continuity with the case, should the case move to the termination

of parental rights. The KCN will be interested in understanding the impact this pilot will have on the role of the CASA volunteer in the courtroom and improved collaboration with the Cabinet. With the change, the CASA volunteer would be the sole party who is not an attorney on the case providing a report to the court.

## **II. New Judicial Commission on Mental Health**

The KCN is participating in the Dependency, Abuse, and Neglect Subcommittee of the newly formed Judicial Commission on Mental Health. The work of this subcommittee will be to explore ways of supporting families who struggle with both mental health needs and substance abuse disorder both with pre-court intervention and post-court activity. The subcommittee is looking to adopt and recommend best practices to support struggling families in a positive, impactful way. It is critically important that families who struggle with mental health issues have access to preventive services that reduce the likelihood of having cases brought before the court. When petitions are filed due to imminent risk to a child, ensuring that there are wraparound services for these families is imperative for reunification.

## **THE ROLE OF THE CASA VOLUNTEER IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM IN KENTUCKY**

CASA volunteers in the Commonwealth of Kentucky play a vital role in many aspects of the child welfare system that include family and juvenile courts, DCBS, and the juvenile justice system. CASA volunteers serve as child advocates providing a much-needed voice for an abused and neglected child caught up in a complex and daunting system through no fault of their own.

CASA volunteers are objective, community-based volunteers who are appointed by judges to serve in child abuse, neglect, and dependency cases. Once assigned to a child, the volunteer has regular in-person visits with the child, researches the child's case, reviews documents, interviews relevant people to the case, and makes a report to the court as to what is in the best interest of the child, in terms of services, placement, visitation, reunification, and permanency. CASA volunteers monitor the child's placement, whether they are in foster care, in relative placement, or remain in their current homes with their biological parents until permanency is achieved. Volunteers are often the only constant the child knows as they move through the labyrinth of the child welfare system. This unique role is one that allows the CASA volunteer and local CASA programs to view the system with a unique lens.

### **Requirements and Description of a CASA Volunteer in Kentucky**

Volunteers are screened, trained, and supervised by professional staff at local CASA programs. Pursuant to standards from the National CASA/GAL Association for Children and Kentucky statutory provisions, volunteers are required to receive a minimum of 30 hours of initial training, engage in court observation pre-service if possible, and complete 12 hours of continuing education each year.

## STATEWIDE CASA DATA

	CY 2020	CY 2021	CY 2022
Children Served	3,574	3,758	3,538
Assigned Volunteers	1,275	1,302	1,239
New Volunteers Trained	360	324	328

## THE SYSTEM CASA NAVIGATES IN KENTUCKY

	CY 2020	CY 2021	CY 2022
AOC Petitions Filed <sup>1</sup>	16,985	17,809	16,721
Children in DCBS Substantiations <sup>2</sup>	25,459	22,837	20,324

<sup>1</sup> CY 2020, 2021, and 2022 data provided by the Administrative Office of the Courts

<sup>2</sup> CY 2020, 2021, and 2022 data provided by the Department for Community Based Services

## WHERE CASA PROGRAMS ARE LOCATED IN KENTUCKY AS OF JANUARY 2023

Currently, CASA programs serve the following 85 counties in Kentucky:

Allen, Anderson, Ballard, Barren, Boone, Bourbon, Boyd, Boyle, Bracken, Breckinridge, Bullitt, Caldwell, Calloway, Campbell, Carlisle, Carroll, Carter, Christian, Clark, Clay, Crittenden, Daviess, Edmonson, Elliott, Fayette, Fleming, Floyd, Franklin, Fulton, Gallatin, Garrard, Grant, Graves, Grayson, Hardin, Harrison, Hart, Henderson, Henry, Hickman, Hopkins, Jefferson, Jessamine, Kenton, Knott, Knox, Laurel, Leslie, Letcher, Lincoln, Livingston, Lyon, Madison, Magoffin, Marion, Marshall, Mason, McCracken, McLean, Meade, Mercer, Metcalfe, Morgan, Muhlenberg, Nelson, Nicholas, Oldham, Owen, Pendleton, Perry, Pike, Pulaski, Robertson, Rockcastle, Scott, Shelby, Simpson, Spencer, Trigg, Trimble, Union, Warren, Washington, Webster, Woodford

By the end of 2024, CASA programs have a goal to be serving the following 16 counties:

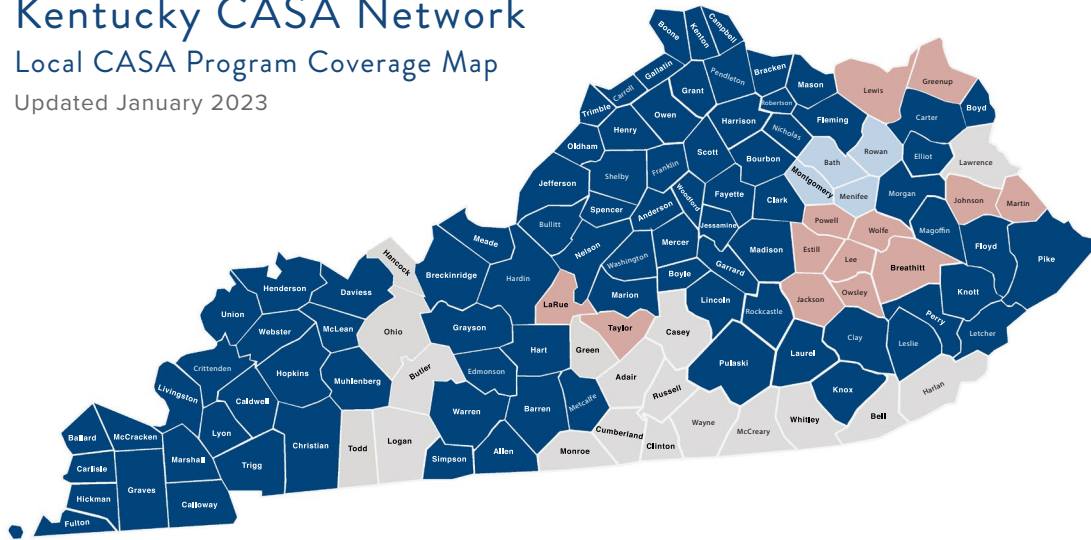
Bath, Breathitt, Estill, Greenup, Jackson, Johnson, Lee, Lewis, Martin, Menifee, Montgomery, Owsley, Powell, Rowan, Taylor, Wolfe



# Kentucky CASA Network

## Local CASA Program Coverage Map

Updated January 2023



### Map Key

- Currently covered by a local CASA program
- Local community and/or existing CASA program actively working through National CASA/GAL Membership Process to bring CASA services to this county
- KCN Growth Plan to bring CASA services to these counties by mid-2024



## LOCAL CASA PROGRAM DIRECTORY

### BOONE COUNTY CASA

Serving Boone and Gallatin Counties  
Colleen Maier, Executive Director

### CASA BY THE LAKES

Serving Calloway and Marshall Counties  
Jessica Foust, Executive Director

### CASA OF CLAY, KNOX AND LAUREL COUNTIES

Serving Clay, Knox and Laurel Counties  
Debra Hauser, Executive Director

### CASA OF GRAVES COUNTY & SOUTHWEST KY

Serving Carlisle, Fulton, Graves, and Hickman Counties  
Stephanie Floyd, Executive Director

### CASA OF LEXINGTON

Serving Bourbon, Fayette, Garrard, Jessamine, Lincoln, Scott, and Woodford Counties  
Melynda Jamison, Executive Director

### CASA OF MADISON AND CLARK COUNTIES

Serving Clark and Madison Counties  
Victoria Benge, Executive Director

### CASA OF MIDWEST KENTUCKY

Serving Crittenden, Henderson, Hopkins, Muhlenberg, Union, and Webster Counties  
Daphne Maddox, Executive Director

### CASA OF NORTHEAST KY

Serving Boyd, Carter, Elliott, and Morgan Counties  
Anna Browning, Interim Executive Director

### CASA OF OHIO VALLEY

Serving Daviess and McLean Counties  
Ashley Evans-Smith, Executive Director

### CASA OF SOUTH CENTRAL KY

Serving Allen, Barren, Edmonson, Hart, Metcalfe, Simpson, and Warren Counties  
Melinda Hill, Executive Director

### CASA OF SOUTHERN KENTUCKY

Serving Pulaski and Rockcastle Counties  
Amy Marcum, Executive Director

### CASA OF THE APPALACHIAN MOUNTAINS

Serving Floyd, Knott, Leslie, Letcher, Magoffin, Perry, and Pike Counties  
Kristyn Densmore-Smith, Executive Director



**CASA OF THE BLUEGRASS**

Serving Anderson, Boyle, Franklin, and Mercer Counties

Tami Wilson, Executive Director

**CASA OF THE GATEWAY REGION**

Serving Bath, Menifee, Montgomery, and Rowan Counties

*Developing program*

**CASA OF THE HEARTLAND**

Serving Hardin County

Michelle Kail, Executive Director

**CASA OF THE LINCOLN TRAIL**

Serving Marion, Nelson, and Washington Counties

Kate Broaddus, Executive Director

**CASA OF THE NORTHERN BLUEGRASS REGION**

Serving Campbell, Carroll, Grant, Harrison, Kenton, Owen, and Pendleton Counties

Nicky Jeffries, Executive Director

**CASA OF THE RIVER REGION**

Serving Bullitt, Henry, Jefferson, Oldham, Shelby, Spencer, and Trimble Counties

William Myers, President & CEO

**CASA OF WEST KENTUCKY**

*A project of Child Watch Counseling & Advocacy Center*

Serving Ballard, Caldwell, Livingston, Lyon, McCracken, and Trigg Counties

Janie Criner, Executive Director of Child Watch Counseling & Advocacy Center

Stephanie Moss, CASA Program Director

**CASA PROGRAM OF CHRISTIAN COUNTY, KY**

Serving Christian County

Kira Bailey, Executive Director

**THE BUFFALO TRACE CASA PROGRAM**

Serving Bracken, Fleming, Mason, Nicholas, and Robertson Counties

Rebecca Palmer, Executive Director

**TRI-COUNTY CASA**

Serving Breckinridge, Grayson, and Meade Counties

Lori Aldridge, Executive Director

**CHANGE A CHILD'S STORY.™**



## ABOUT THE KCN

Kentucky CASA Network, Inc. (KCN) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, governed by a board of directors, that provides ongoing development, training, technical assistance, and resources to local CASA programs across Kentucky. The KCN also advocates for the needs and interests of CASA programs and volunteers with industry stakeholders in Frankfort, participates on state child welfare policy-making committees, and advances the CASA mission statewide.

## MISSION

The mission of the KCN is to support the development, growth, and continuation of Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) programs in Kentucky. CASA programs recruit and train volunteers to advocate on behalf of children who have come into the court system as a result of dependency, neglect, or abuse.

## OUR VALUES

Collaboration \* Service \* Accountability \* Gratitude \* Transparency

## BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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Freelance Trainer (Owensboro)

Robin Choate - Vice Chair  
Retired MEd, BSN, and RN (Bronston)

Bryan Bulkley - Treasurer  
BeatStars (Louisville)

Laken Albrink  
Morehead State University (Morehead)

Dana Hummel  
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Ruth Lynch  
Retired Educator/Community Volunteer  
(Hopkinsville)

Hollie Spade  
AT&T Kentucky (Louisville)

Victoria Bengé - Local Program Representative  
CASA of Madison and Clark Counties (Richmond)

## STAFF

Andrea Bruns - State Director/CEO

Terry Manuel - Director of Strategy & Board  
Relations

Brittany Garrett - Director of Communications

Melissa Paris - Director of Training & Impact

Karen Wilder - Director of Quality Assurance

Mary Turner-Scott - Office Administrator

Norma Thomas - Grants Specialist

Doug Myers - Quality Assurance Specialist

Katy Leonard - Marketing Intern

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