



Chair Abrams, Vice Chair Williams, Ranking Member Brown and members of the House Criminal Justice Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide public testimony in support of House Bill 122.

My name is Ann Walden and I am the Executive Director of CASA of Portage County. CASA of Portage County is one of the newest CASA programs in the state and has been operational since March 11, 2022.

CASA stands for Court Appointed Special Advocate. CASA volunteers are highly trained community members who have made the choice to advocate for the best interests of children who have been abused and neglected. CASA volunteers give many hours of their time to this endeavor. In CASA of Portage County's first 9 months of operation, CASA volunteers donated approximately 1,800 hours of their time to advocate for our county's most vulnerable children.

For a CASA program to run effectively, we must be able to recruit and retain volunteers. CASA of Portage County is a fledgling program and we put forth a lot of effort to find compassionate community members willing to take on this role. One of the primary goals of this program is to train and retain high quality volunteers.

CASA has existed since 1977. Research has been conducted on CASA and we know there are benefits for children who have a CASA volunteer appointed to them. Children with a CASA volunteer have significantly fewer placements, are less likely to re-enter the child welfare system, and are more likely to achieve permanency.

Now that CASA of Portage County has been operational for one year, we are seeing the challenges that can come when appointed to emotionally charged cases involving abuse and neglect. Individuals involved in these cases can become angry about the recommendations proposed by CASA volunteers. It is essential that CASA volunteers are protected so that they can fulfill the responsibilities of their role.

Once again, CASA volunteers are just that, volunteers. These are not paid professionals. CASA volunteers choose to take on this role because they believe in protecting and advocating for the most vulnerable children in our county. CASA volunteers deserve to be protected because they perform a valuable mission for children.

The need for CASA volunteers is not decreasing. This is evidenced by the fact that Portage County's program just began on March 11, 2022. Our program does not yet even have enough volunteers to advocate for every abused and neglected child in the county. House Bill 122 would help to ensure protection for our current volunteers, while at the same time, allowing us to recruit new volunteers with the understanding that their safety is a priority.

Please support the protection that House Bill 122 would provide to CASA volunteers and Guardians Ad Litem and favorably pass this bill out of committee.

