

CHANGE A
CHILD'S STORY.™



Chairman LaRe, Vice Chairman Sweringen, Ranking Member Leland, and members of the House Criminal Justice Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide public testimony in support of House Bill 226.

My name is Megan McCombs Heydlauff, and I am an attorney and the Guardian Ad Litem and Domestic Violence Services Director at the Ohio CASA/GAL Association, the statewide organization that provides support to local CASA programs and their volunteers through training, funding, leadership, quality assurance, and management assistance.

A Court Appointed Special Advocate is a member of the community who is highly trained as a volunteer to advocate in court for the best interest of children who have been abused or neglected. An average child welfare case lasts two years, during which a child experiences three changed placements. CASA volunteers are assigned to a child for the duration of that child's case. A CASA volunteer gets to know the child and the family on a personal level, often becoming the only consistent adult presence in a child's life filled with so many other changes.

Currently, 45 local CASA programs serve children in 56 of Ohio's 88 counties. In 2020, a total of 9,825 of Ohio's children were served by CASA programs. The primary reason more children are not served is the lack of volunteers.

Research shows that children who experience abuse and neglect and who are served by a CASA volunteer are more likely to be placed in a safe and permanent home, receive more services, spend less time in foster care, experience fewer changes in placement, and do better in school.

However, serving as a CASA volunteer does not come without challenges, many of which this bill would directly impact. Local CASA program directors report incidences ranging from intimidation, verbal death threats, and harassment to both the volunteer and the volunteer's family, including at personal residences. Further, law enforcement is often unclear about the role of both Guardians ad Litem and CASA volunteers, and in which venue such harassment can be addressed. House Bill 226 would clarify this ambiguity. CASA volunteers and Guardians ad Litem would be assured that any issues they encounter will be met with swift attention; law enforcement and the courts would have the tools to effectively address this type of conduct. Categorizing and assigning consequences to this harassment gives weight to its impact on a CASA volunteer or Guardian ad Litem and dissuades the conduct.

With Ohio's foster care system becoming increasingly overwhelmed, the need for more CASA volunteers has never been greater. At Ohio CASA, we believe that every child should have a safe, permanent, and loving home and we believe that every child in need should have a CASA volunteer. House Bill 226 would improve our ability to recruit volunteers by ensuring protection to those who work tirelessly to better the lives of Ohio's children. We support the protection that House Bill 226 would provide to CASA volunteers and Guardians Ad Litem who do this crucial work. Thank you.