

Members of the House Committee in review of House Bill 226, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of House Bill 226.

My name is Mary Ruth Shumway, I am currently the Director of the CASA for Kids of Geauga County Program. I began my CASA career as a Volunteer in 2003 and took my first case in 2004. I have served 50+ children since that time.

A CASA, 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. In our county the CASA Volunteers also serve custody, juvenile unruly, and juvenile delinquent cases. The Volunteer gets to know the child and family on a personal level, often becoming the only consistent person for that child during the entire life of the case.

On one occasion I was in the movie store selecting a movie with my two daughters when the mother on a case started yelling at my daughter that I stole children for a living. She began to chase her around the store yelling and screaming at her. I asked the manager to call the police. I filed a report. Nothing happened. My daughter was 12 years old.

On another occasion I served a child who had had six social workers and enumerable placements including a disrupted adoption in 2005 through 2009. At that time, I was a widow with five children of my own. I was phoned by children's services to say they had a very serious anonymous report about my child and I. As I heard the report of me sexually abusing my child, hitting him and not providing adequate clothing, I told them it was ludicrous for them not to know I was the CASA on a case identical to the report. I had been on the case for four years where the mother obviously called and reported the same information for which her child had now been permanently removed. I was furious to learn they had gone to my son's school to interview him about the incidents. He was pulled out of class and questioned about my finances and sex involving the two of us. I have enclosed a letter I requested the sexual intervention specialist write to put in my file since the damage had already been done.

Research shows that children who experience abuse and neglect 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 does not come without many challenges, many of which this bill would directly impact. As a Director for five years, I have personally heard incidences ranging from name calling to a recent call to “shoot everyone at the hearing.” Ohio CASA Directors believe every child should have a CASA Volunteer, trained to advocate for a child and be the voice requesting through an unbiased court report giving specific recommendations for that child’s best interest to be served. In serving our children, House Bill 226 would assure volunteers that any issues they encounter would be swiftly addressed, courts would be able to enforce conduct, and consequences would dissuade further behaviors. House Bill 226 would further enable us to recruit and retain superb Volunteers and Guardian Ad Litem who do this invaluable work.