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## NEWS

## Special Advocates

## Volunteers speak for children who need the court's help.

By Joan Tuppeonce

With an ever-growing caseload, judges in Henrico's Juvenile Court have no time to gather additional information that would help them evaluate the cases they hear for abuse and neglect.

That's where Henrico CASA steps in.

The nonprofit group recruits, screens, supervises and trains volunteers from the county to act as advocates for children in juvenile proceedings related to abuse and neglect.

"That's all we do and that is what we do well," says the organization's director, Barbara Herzog.

Retired Juvenile Court Judge William Boice was instrumental in the founding of the organization in 1994 after hearing about the CASA concept. "It started so the judges in the court system can get information on cases," Herzog says.

Henrico CASA works with children from birth through age 18. Last year it served 400 young people. About 100 volunteers provide a consistent point of contact for each child. The organization was one of the nine winners of the 2013 Governor's Volunteerism and Community Service Awards.

Volunteers for the organization range in age from 21 to 83, from people with GEDs to Ph.D.s. "They don't have to have a specific background," Herzog says. "They have to have the power of observation and good judgment."

After a thorough interview process, volunteers complete a 35-plus-hour pre-service training course that provides a basic overview of Henrico's systems and services along with courtroom observation. After completion, they are sworn in as officers of the court.

Leigh Lyons graduated from training in spring 2012. She enjoys the fact that she is making a difference in a child's life. "We are the eyes and ears of the judge," she says. "We are making sure that children are safe."

The staff at Henrico CASA is very supportive of the volunteers, she adds. "You are not out there by yourself. You are working as a team."

CASA volunteers interview professionals such as teachers, therapists and social workers about each child before providing the court with a written report of their findings. "We stay on the case until it is resolved. We have worked on cases for up to five years," Herzog says.

Volunteering for the organization is a "lifestyle" choice that requires buy-in for the person's employer and spouse. "Our volunteers are a unique crew. Some have been volunteering for 17 years," Herzog says. "They are quite phenomenal."

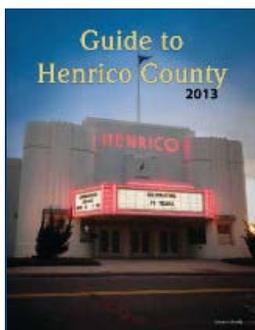
Each year the organization's workload grows. Since 2008, cases in the western end of the county have grown 26 percent. Eighty-nine percent of overall cases involve substance abuse by a caregiver. "We have seen a great rise in the use of prescription drugs among the parents," Herzog says. "That has been much more of an issue."

Volunteers also deal with cases of medical and educational neglect. "A parent may not be getting their kids to school or supporting them in their academic process," Herzog says. "We are very effective on educational neglect cases. The nice thing about CASA is that we can figure out what is going on with mom and dad."

The agency, which runs on an annual budget of \$350,000, receives the bulk of its funding through the United Way, foundations, fundraising events and individual donations. "Over the course of 20 years our program has grown consistently and so has the support," Herzog says.



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Henrico Juvenile Judge Denis F. Soden offers high praise. "All the volunteers have shown a deep sense of commitment and caring – despite, in many circumstances, being rebuffed by parents or being treated rudely," he says. "The CASA program simply gives children an ally, provides hope and enables the judge to weigh numerous facts, recommendations, etc., on behalf of the children. From leadership, training, dedication and reports to the cooperation CASA provides, this judge would give CASA an 'A' rating."



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