

Every child deserves an advocate

BY JENNIFER MYLENEK | June 24, 2018

As a CASA program, we stand with those who have voiced outrage at the inhumane separation of innocent children from their parents at the border. This is not a political statement, nor is it assuming a side; it is in defense of all children's rights to safety and well-being.

It is clearly documented that children who experience trauma, such as being separated from their parents in a foreign land, can suffer disrupted brain development and the lifelong health effects of trauma. As a CASA program, we stand with every innocent child who is removed from their parent/s for any reason. Children need a voice in these circumstances more than anyone.

Simply stated, if children are not heard, their rights are often not considered, and as a result, their suffering and trauma is multiplied and safety and permanency can be delayed. If they have a CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate), they have someone who makes their story come alive to everyone involved, someone who is listening to

them, who knows who they are and what they've been through. Someone who wants them to be in a safe, loving home, whether it is back with their parents, with a relative or with a new family. Someone who sticks by them no matter how long it takes for them to be safe.

Usually, child victims have never met a person like their CASA, who is reliable, trustworthy and for them. Likewise, they usually never forget their CASAs. We see the profound differences CASAs make in children's lives every day.

National news put a lens on the tragedy at the border, but rarely puts a lens on the children who, every day, go through the child welfare system without a volunteer advocate to speak up for them. These victims of abuse or neglect, who are traumatized, who become invisible in the courtroom without a CASA, desperately need to be with caring families where they can feel safe. It is our mission and our passion throughout the network of CASA programs in Oregon to find a way both through bringing capable volunteers to our programs and, through funding development, to ensure every child under the care of Child Welfare is appointed a CASA advocate.

I feel it is everyone's responsibility to speak up for children who are hurting and without a voice. It should be the culture of our country and our citizens to do so without hesitation, regardless of the circumstances or the child's country of origin.

If you'd like to learn more about becoming a CASA, call 541-734-2272 or go to Jacksoncountycasa.org. CASA is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization. CASAs are highly trained and supported volunteers appointed by the courts to advocate for local child victims of abuse/neglect.

Jennifer Mylenek is executive director of CASA of Jackson and Josephine Counties.