



SECURITY AT RISK:

A REPORT ON THE IMPACT ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN FAMILY COURT PROCEEDINGS

JANUARY 2002

You go to bed at night, wondering if tonight something could happen. It's been quiet for awhile, but the memories of the terror are still very fresh. Other memories, of a time when you could take peace for granted, are a blurred image. The hardest part is the seeming randomness of it. You don't understand why horrible things happened one day and not another, to you or the people you love and not to the family down the street. You feel powerless. Even scarier is that you're not sure that anyone can really make it stop or help you to feel safe again.

These are the feelings of Americans in the midst of a war on terrorism. We are, and should be devoting our time and money to winning that war and to helping the people most closely touched by this violence. These are also the feelings of a child who is being abused. The war against child abuse is one we could lose.

WHAT WE KNOW

More than a million children are abused and neglected each year in the United States. In New York State alone, more than 40,000 children suffer maltreatment or neglect severe enough to warrant removal from their homes and placement in foster care. We know that childhood histories of abuse are reliable predictors of adult substance abuse, domestic violence, criminal activity, and a host of other mental, emotional, developmental, and medical problems.

As a nation, we spend a dollar treating the effects of child abuse for every penny spent on prevention. The need for these expenditures has not changed since Sept. 11th. The need has not changed since the state passed a "Bare Bones" budget in August 2001. We will have to continue to find money, qualified professionals, and caring communities to battle child abuse and all of its consequences. If anything, what we are seeing and what we fear for the future, is that child abuse and neglect is on the increase and more, not fewer, resources must be devoted to helping its victims.

The Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) program sees first-hand some of the worst cases across the state, not only the extremes of family dysfunction but of the failure of overburdened service systems to help. More than 500 CASA volunteers working with local CASA programs in 25 counties statewide devote thousands of hours helping more than 3,500

victims of child abuse and neglect find the safe, permanent homes they deserve. By taking only one or two cases at a time, CASAs are able to provide what many of these children lack – the consistent presence of a dedicated adult in their lives who has only their best interests at heart.

WHAT 2001 BROUGHT

Three crises have impacted the children CASA serves this year: the state budget, the economy, and the events of Sept. 11th. The state's "Bare Bones" budget threw hundreds of agencies, including CASA programs, into uncertainty about their fiscal viability. Having fought for years to document service needs, and having proven success in meeting that need, agencies now found that the state's money and dollars were short. To compound this situation, millions in pass-through federal dollars were jeopardized, funds many of these same agencies count on to keep their doors open.

At the same time, a downturn in the economy is impacting private donations. Unemployment is becoming a more common occurrence among our families, and with it more need for services.

Then came the tragedies of Sept. 11th, and the nation and the state turned its attention and resources to helping the victims and mobilizing to meet the threat of future events. The "Bare Bones" budget now became an opportunity to divert funds to relief efforts.

But the other needs have not gone away. Families still struggle with mental illnesses, substance abuse, poverty, domestic violence, sexual assault, developmental disabilities, homelessness, educational challenges, hunger, and communities fraught with violence. Small children still come home to empty cupboards and roach infestations, still get beatings from drunken parents. Older children still are enticed to join gangs, and find themselves acting out the violence they have learned all too well.

What has changed is that the government and private services that kept some of those families intact and helped other children find safety in foster care and adoptive homes are stretched to their maximum capability. County services may be substantially reduced in the year ahead and not-for-profits may need to lay off staff and close programs. In Rockland County for example, not-for-profits have already been informed their budgets for 2002 will be cut by at least 15% and some have been eliminated from the budget entirely. The social service landscape is likely to see a number of agencies out of business by the end of 2002.

At a recent gathering of not-for-profit leaders held by the Council on Community Services, charities not directly connected to relief or war efforts discussed their struggle to compete for state and federal dollars, foundation grants and private donations. Attendance at fund-raising events is down. In order to stay in business, agencies statewide are cutting staff, limiting travel, slashing training dollars. Talented and experienced personnel are leaving for more secure livelihoods.

This crisis in services is not happening in a vacuum, but is happening at the same time that stressed families are unraveling. CASA programs statewide are reporting cases in which reunification plans have been derailed since Sept. 11th because of the exacerbation of symptoms of mental illness, unemployment, or substance abuse. Among older children, there are increases in truancy, runaways, and violence.

Every American is struggling to find ways to cope with a new era of uncertainty and fear. Families already overwhelmed, already lacking coping skills, already fearful and uncertain about their futures have simply been pushed over the edge. They will turn to their communities for help and be faced with huge waiting lists and frenzied staff, or no services at all. Then these families will turn to what they know – substance abuse, crime, and violence against their loved ones. More children will end up abused and neglected, adding more critical needs for services.

WHY CASA IS NEEDED

We would not as a nation have survived the events of Sept. 11th without the outpouring of volunteerism that dug out the remains of the World Trade Center, made donations to the survivors, and enlisted thousands in the armed services. This is community caring for community, and that is what it will take for us to overcome the crisis of abuse and neglect that will worsen for our children in the year ahead.

CASA is a volunteer program in which caring individuals reach out to help children in their communities, help them to return and stay in safe and nurturing homes or find new homes where they can learn to trust and to love. In the current fiscal climate, there is currently no feasible plan by which the government or private funders can or will devote the kind of resources to supply enough paid professionals to help keep our children safe. **Without volunteerism, we will place more children at risk, watch more children get hurt, and turn more children away from the services they need.**

Trained, supervised and dedicated CASA volunteers who watch over these children one at a time, for as long as it takes to secure their safety, are the most cost-efficient and viable option to address the present crisis in funding and in need. CASA can work with all of the other dedicated professionals and community members to help keep children safe.

WHAT CASA NEEDS

CASA's more than 500 volunteers are recruited from the community, undergo more than 30 hours of initial training plus regular in-services. They are closely supervised by professionals at the local level, and enjoy the support of both a state and national network. The recruitment, training and supervision of volunteers require resources to sustain and expand programs.

Family Court Judges across the state are assigning more cases to CASA, and more difficult cases. The need for more CASA volunteers, and the development of CASA programs in new counties, has steadily increased since the passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act, with its mandates for shorter stays in foster care and greater expedience in terminating parental rights in cases where reunification is not possible. CASA programs are also seeing a cutback in the availability of legal services to the families we serve, a result both of budget cutbacks and *pro bono* activities being diverted to cases related to the Sept. 11th attacks. CASA programs report in a November 2001 survey that there is increasing dysfunction in many of their cases, that in some instances they are being asked to move a volunteer from one case to a family in greater crisis. CASAs report more problems securing services for these families, more instability in homes, and they are hearing dire warnings about what lies ahead in the accessibility of vital services.

At the same time CASA, like other not-for-profits not directly related to Sept. 11th relief efforts, is having to work harder to secure volunteers and public donations. The CASA programs

that enjoy some government funding, or are housed in agencies dependent on that funding, are braced for drastic cutbacks or even closure in 2002.

This is not a time when we can afford to lose the caring eye of volunteers, when we can turn our back on intensive, individualized services that are provided at low cost to local or state government. What little resources are available to CASA in government funding must be maintained to ensure the viability of the program. And foundations, corporate and private donations must be sustained if not increased over the coming year.

Supporting CASA provides assistance to other government and private agencies dedicated to helping families. Supporting CASA directly supports children who are victims of abuse and neglect. Supporting CASA utilizes a small amount of resources for a large benefit.

WHAT CASA FEARS

Child abuse did not disappear on Sept. 11, 2001. In fact, all indicators point to its increase in the months ahead. If we are solely focused on other worthy demands, we will create a geometric progression of need among families and another generation of adults who resort to abuse.

While millions of Americans are getting their first taste of living with the constant threat of violence, we will turn our backs on the children who have known that life for years. And our promise to help them will be broken.

Notes:

More than a third of CASA's cases involve sexual abuse. The events of and following Sept. 11th have increased reports of symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder among children who are victims of sexual assault and among adult sexual abuse survivors.

Eighty percent of CASA's caseloads involve substance abuse. According to a report in Crain's New York Business, drug and alcohol problems have been on the increase since Sept. 11th. Counselors say anxiety and job losses are driving chronic and former addicts to seek comfort in drugs and alcohol, and raising additional concerns about the spread of AIDS and hepatitis.

Case Examples:

-- Family reunification efforts ended in an upstate county when a mother surrendered custody of her child Sept. 11th after learning of the attacks. She dropped out of her drug rehab program where she had been doing well and on Sept. 13 was treated for severe depression.

-- A 10-year-old girl was beginning extended visits with her mother after two years in foster care. Her mom had been making good progress in therapy and on medication for a mental illness. After Sept. 11th, her symptoms of anxiety and paranoia dramatically increased. She stopped taking her medication, and visits were discontinued.

"Given the cost-effectiveness of CASA and the overburdened child welfare and juvenile court system, the use of citizen volunteers sanctioned by CASA programs remains a viable option to provide a voice for children who might otherwise become lost in the system." --Litzelfelner, P., "The Effectiveness of CASAs in Achieving Positive Outcomes for Children," Child Welfare, LXXIX, 2, March/April 2000]

“The assignment of a CASA volunteer is the single most effective step that a judge can take to ensure the health, welfare and safety of the children in that family.” (Albany County Family Court Judge W. Dennis Duggan)

For more information about Court Appointed Special Advocates, contact:

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