

Finding allies for children in court

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For President Judge Chester Harhut, the idea of bringing in volunteers to help children in the court system has been a long time coming.

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For President Judge Chester Harhut, the idea of bringing in volunteers to help children in the court system has been a long time coming.

The county received grant money more than five years ago to launch a program that paired children in abuse and neglect cases with advocates who would spend time getting to know their needs. But Judge Harhut and other court officials had a hard time finding an agency that would take a leading role in the project, including screening volunteers and coordinating training.

Enter the Advocacy Alliance in Scranton. Already involved in advocating for children and families who suffer from a myriad of problems, heading up a program like this one seemed like a good fit, according to Mary Jane Yevics, director of guardianship at the Advocacy Alliance.

"We started talking about it last fall," Ms. Yevics said. "Really, it's an extension of what we do."

The national program, called Court Appointed Special Advocates or CASA, began in Seattle in 1977. Volunteers go through a training program and then are assigned to a case involving an abused or neglected child.

After several meetings with that child, the volunteer can convey the child's concerns, issues and needs to the judge presiding over the case. That way, the parties involved in the case can better decide what's right for the child in question.

"The one thing a child needs is a person in their life they can turn to and talk to," Judge Harhut said. "This is a way of providing that."

That role is usually played by a county Children and Youth Services caseworker. But in Lackawanna County, staffers juggle 20 to 30 cases at a time, according to Children and Youth Services Director Bill Browning.

"CASA volunteers will have a maximum of two cases," Mr. Browning said. "It's impossible for CYS to do" what a CASA volunteer can do for these children.

The CASA program is already in place in 33 counties in the state, and more than 900 jurisdictions across the U.S. Mr. Browning said he welcomes the program because it's another way for his staffers to help children.

"We're all working toward what's best for the child," he said.

Now that court officials and the Advocacy Alliance have joined forces, all that's necessary to get the program off the ground are the volunteers. Volunteers must be over 18 and pass a criminal background check, among other requirements.

Once they are accepted into the CASA program, they must undergo about 30 hours of training before they are assigned to a case.

An informational meeting, geared toward community leaders and elected officials will be held at 2 p.m. Thursday on the fifth floor of the County Administration Building, 200 Adams Ave.

Both Judge Harhut and Mr. Browning say they can't stress enough how a program like this will impact kids in the community.

"I have high hopes for this," the judge said. "It's going to make a big difference for the kids."

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ON THE WEB: http://www.national.casa.org/about_us/index.html