

Commitment to Community

WCEC employees continuously demonstrate their commitment to community, not only through their careers, but also in their daily lives. On their own time, many WCEC workers volunteer with regional fire departments, work at various charitable fundraisers, serve on local chambers of commerce and keep occupied with Rotary, Kiwanis and other humanitarian endeavors.

Two such employees, Joe Brady and Tommy Brown, are a good example of that: They both have volunteered to put their time and talents to good use serving on the Board of Directors of CASA for Kids of East Texas.

Brady, a Quitman native, has been employed by WCEC since 1977 in various capacities and currently works as a field service representative. He first heard about CASA from his wife's boss, Sharon Howell. She served on CASA's board as a director. CASA was searching for someone to represent Wood County, so Howell talked to Brady about the organization. He then visited with several others at CASA ET to learn more and ultimately joined. He and the other board members work to ensure that state and national guidelines are followed and oversee funding and fundraising.

"I was very involved in community programs as my own children were growing up and did not realize how much I'd missed that until this opportunity came along," Brady said. "It was the right time in my life to get involved in helping children again. I am extremely glad I accepted the position. The volunteers are such outstanding individuals, and it is the only organization I have ever been involved in where there is just one agenda. It's all about helping the kids."

Brown, WCEC's key accounts manager, who lives near Mineola, has been employed at WCEC since 1994. He first heard about CASA when Brady was looking to recruit another board member. After Brown learned more, he was also very willing to serve.

"I like hearing about the success stories of the kids and helping keep them safe and secure," Brown said. "I also enjoy telling others about CASA and the good things that the organization does. Also, as a board member, one of the jobs is to help recruit volunteers. So I would like to use this as an opportunity to invite anyone that may be interested in volunteering or helping CASA in anyway to call me." He can be reached at (903) 763-2203.

WCEC Key Accounts Manager Tommy Brown and Field Service Representative Joe Brady are proponents of and volunteers for CASA, serving on its board of directors.



Elaine Johnson, WCEC member and community volunteer, received the 2012 Extraordinary Volunteer Award from CASA.

Hats Off to Member-Volunteer

WCEC Member Elaine Johnson of Golden was the recipient of the 2012 Judge Ruth Blake Extraordinary Volunteer Award and has been a CASA for the past four years. Thus far, she has helped with 10 cases, affecting the lives of 18 children. At the time of her award, she was advocating for five children in three separate cases.

In addition to her work as a CASA, she is a retired teacher of 19 years. She also volunteers for the Kindness Cottage and First United Methodist Church of Mineola, where she teaches first-graders and kindergarteners once a week after school. She is married and the mother of three grown children. In her spare time, she raises geese.

"Being a CASA is one of the most rewarding things I have ever done," Johnson said. "I can honestly say that with every child I have worked with, their outcome has been in their best interest. It's all about advocating for what is best for each individual child."

"I would encourage others to do this. Anybody that loves children, and most people do, can make a difference for a child."

Johnson said she would like to especially encourage men to volunteer. She said that there are many teenage boys in the system who need a strong male presence and role model.

TransCanada Project Spurs Substation Construction

To meet the operational needs of the Keystone Pipeline's Gulf Coast Project, Wood County Electric Cooperative will erect a new substation in the Winnsboro region.

TransCanada's Gulf Coast Project consists of a 485-mile pipeline from Cushing, Oklahoma, to Nederland. During project planning, TransCanada, or TC, has been securing easements, making land purchases and developing service agreements. In this process, it was determined that the planned route of the pipeline will include WCEC's service territory.

Because of this and the need for a large pumping station in the general region southeast of Winnsboro, TC officials approached WCEC about its future electric needs. It was determined that the project would require a new 26-megawatt substation to meet TC's operational electricity demand.

As an electric cooperative, WCEC has an obligation to serve any entity within its service territory that requires electricity. To ensure that WCEC and its members would not bear any construction costs for the project, whether it was built or not, WCEC and TC agreed that TC would pay for all materials and construction costs associated with serving TC's electricity needs. Therefore, TC is paying for the substation needed to serve their project, as well as eight miles of transmission line that will need to be rebuilt.

The electric load drawn from the pumping station will depend on the needs of TransCanada as it operates its pipeline, but load projections and the requested voltage necessitated a dedicated substation. TC will be the sole member receiving electricity from that substation, so its operations should not affect any other WCEC members.

That revenue should also help WCEC and its members by allowing the spread of operational cost over a larger sales base. WCEC and its members will also benefit from the transmission line that TC paid to have rebuilt, because it serves other regional members. Because of the new line, in the case of future load growth in that area, power quality will not be negatively affected. WCEC will also save on future expenses on the new line because over time, a cycle of line replacement will have been eliminated. Another advantage of this new line is that the design replaces existing wooden poles with concrete poles, which offer a more stable structure with less maintenance.

WCEC CEO and General Manager Debbie Robinson said: "We felt it was extremely important that our members not bear any of the costs associated with the construction of this project. The management at TransCanada recognized that also and willingly paid the costs. They've been very agreeable members to work with."

Most of the engineering and construction work will be performed by contractors.

Work on the transmission line is projected to begin in the fall, followed by construction of the substation. Both should be completed around the same time. TransCanada has indicated it will expect the substation to be operational by spring 2013.

WOOD COUNTY ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE

74TH ANNUAL MEETING

Friday, October 5, 2012

Governor Jim Hogg City Park • Quitman, Texas

ENTERTAINMENT 12:30 P.M. • MEETING 2 P.M.

LOTS OF PRIZES, INCLUDING THE GRAND PRIZE: AN HD FLAT-SCREEN TV!



Wood County Electric Cooperative

501 S. Main St. • P.O. Box 1827
Quitman, TX 75783

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Debbie Robinson

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- SmartPower prepay electric system
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- Safety and energy conservation programs

MOBILE CONVENIENCE CENTER

Monday, First Methodist Church, *Van*
Tuesday, Family Dollar, *Mount Vernon*
Wednesday, City National Bank, *Hawkins*
Thursday, Brookshire's, *Winnsboro*
Friday, Economy Drug, *Grand Saline*



Contact Us

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Be a Child's Voice

CASA volunteers work on behalf of children caught in court system

Every child needs a responsible person who will look out for their best interests. Sadly, there are children who, for a variety of reasons, are living a fractured existence among adults who have constantly and consistently failed them. Upon findings of neglect or abuse by Child Protective Services, these children can find themselves wards of the state. And when that happens, these babies, toddlers and teens are placed in temporary situations while the legal and social services systems grind away to find a more favorable and safe setting.

These children (and even whole sibling groups) are put into foster care, which can be in a goodhearted stranger's home, with relatives, or in a institutional residential treatment center or a specialized therapeutic setting. CPS then works to return the child to the family, if that ever becomes appropriate and is in the best interests of the child. Failing that, CPS works to permanently place the child elsewhere. Unfortunately, in East Texas and nationwide, the systems meant to protect children in foster and institutional care are strained and overburdened.

When a child enters the system, the court may appoint a special attorney, called an attorney ad litem. This attorney represents the child and the wishes of the child, which may not actually be in the child's best interests. For example, the child may express wishes to be returned to a parent, even if that parent has been an abuser. The attorney must represent the child and strive to obtain what the child wants. To balance this out, the judge will also appoint a guardian ad litem. It's that person's duty to represent the child, but not necessarily what the child wants. They represent what is in the child's best interest. This person is called a Court Appointed Special Advocate, or a CASA. While a child may want to go home because it is the most familiar life to them, a CASA oversees the process and makes recommen-

dations to enable that to happen safely or works to find other stable and more permanent solutions to help a child not just survive, but thrive.

CASA has grown into a national endeavor, and it started with a Seattle juvenile court judge's concerns about making life-changing decisions for children in foster situations without sufficient information. So in 1977, this judge conceived the idea of appointing citizen volunteers to intimately learn about a child's needs and special circumstances and then act as an informer to the courtroom. CASA has grown to encompass about 950 programs across the nation in 49 states. CASA for Kids of East Texas is one such program, and it currently has 138 volunteers signed up as advocates, but the need is greater.

Community Outreach Coordinator Katherine Elliott says CASA ET has had more than 500 judge-appointed children's cases in Smith, Van Zandt and Wood counties in the past year. With the number of cases, some volunteers take more than one case. The remaining cases are administered by the paid staff of supervisors, of which there are only four. Therefore, Elliott says, CASA ET is always looking for and in great need of more volunteers. She also says that CASA ET works hard to match volunteers to a case.

"We have cases that would fit in for just about every schedule and lifestyle," she said, adding that some of the cases



are not as complicated as others, so minimal time is required of a CASA, but the work is just as important.

Potential volunteers must first fill out an application packet and submit to a thorough background check. Once the background check is completed, Elliott meets with the potential volunteer to give them in-depth information about the roles and responsibilities and also further screen a candidate. The main focus of this screening is to determine if a candidate is an emotional fit. This is important because many times, the CASA is the only stable influence in a child's life. CASA ET wants to make sure that the volunteer will be able to follow through for the duration of a child's case, if possible.

After the screening interview, 32 hours of training are required, and the organization works to provide day and night classes to accommodate the schedules of just about everyone. To make the training even more flexible, 15 hours can



be accomplished online. Also, CASA ET has arranged for several training facilities throughout the region in Wood, Smith and Van Zandt counties so volunteers don't have to travel so far. The classroom instruction is given in four four-hour sessions, followed by one hour of required court observation. The volunteers are then sworn in and assigned a case that they pick themselves.

For case assignment, the volunteers hear the stories and issues in several cases. Some of those cases involve more than one child and can include sibling groups, or they may have some complexities that might take more volunteer time. Proper case assignment is one of the most crucial aspects to better ensure that the child receives an advocate who is suited for them and that the volunteer is capable of best representing the child or sibling group. In cases involving sibling groups, more than one CASA shares the responsibility because each child has

Volunteer Marilyn Dunavant and CASA Community Outreach Coordinator Katherine Elliott encourage others to consider volunteering as a CASA or making a charitable contribution to the nonprofit organization that does so much to help children.

individual needs. No matter the situation, a CASA ET volunteer will always have one of the four supervisors to help lead and guide the case and offer advice.

Once assigned a case, one of the first steps for a CASA is to meet with CPS to better understand the underlying issues that have been previously discovered and documented. Then the CASA arranges to meet the child or sibling group wherever they live. The CASA is required to meet with the child for an hour each month, but most visit much more so they can get a general sense of how the child is doing in his or her environment and learn about any special

needs. For example, in their natural home the child may have missed an abundant amount of school because of a parent's alcohol or drug abuse and inability to get them there. This child may need tutoring. Or, many times these children have never been to a dentist or eye doctor, and they may need treatment. Or the child could have a learning disability and may need specialized therapy. The needs of a child vary with the level of abuse or neglect. Oftentimes a CASA offers the very first serious scrutiny into the child's capabilities, needs, wants and total well-being.

It is through these meetings with the

child that the CASA worker can best learn about the child's challenges and what best to recommend to the judge. These meetings can take place in the custodial home, or the CASA can also take the child on small outings. CASAs can give the children small gifts, but they are encouraged not to spend a lot of their own money. Many times, CASA ET has been given gift certificates from area businesses such as Burger King or other places where the CASA can take the child. Others, such as a young girl spearheading a community drive, have donated teddy bears that a CASA can give to a child as an icebreaker. These

gifts help the CASA develop a relationship with the child and help ensure that they don't have to dip heavily into their own pocketbooks.

A CASA becomes an integral part of a child's case until the case comes to a successful conclusion.

In addition to visiting with the child, a CASA has the authority to request a meeting with just about anyone the child contacts, including teachers, neighbors, relatives and parents. A CASA can even be present during supervised visits with natural parents for observation. In this way, the CASA can see the family dynamics and gather information from

various sources to come up with recommendations for the judge. Depending on the complexities, a case can be completed in a year or so, or it can last years until the child turns 18 and ages out of the foster system.

Every time a child's case goes to court, which is about every three to six months, the child's attorney, CPS workers and the CASA will give an opinion and recommendation to the judge. Because they are all working from different perspectives, many of the opinions may be different. While the child may want to go home to their natural parents (and their attorney must advocate for that), because of a CASA's unique ability to observe, the CASA may have information that has a bearing on whether this is a good idea.

For example, a CASA may have

Elizabeth Anderson, Shirley Griffin and Brittany Belin take a court-administered oath to become CASAs after completing training.



observed that while the natural parent may be attending a court-ordered drug cessation program or attending anger management or parenting classes, that parent may not have changed their lifestyle dramatically or cleanly enough to ensure there will not be relapse. By the same token, the CASA can also inform the court if the parent/child relationship seems healthy during parental visits, and whether a parent has taken honest and solid steps to rectify the issues that prompted their child's removal from the home in the first place. And while a CPS worker must visit a child once a month, because of enormous caseloads, those visits are many times short. The CASA oftentimes can get a much deeper understanding of the family dynamics and the child's unique needs.

Last year, four children were in a situ-

ation where domestic violence occurred. Each of those children had medical issues. The parental rights of the mother were eventually permanently stripped because she chose to stay with the abuser. With help from CASA, three separate families were found to adopt these children. One family adopted the two oldest, one family adopted the middle child, and another family adopted an infant born in the middle of the CPS case. Partially because of CASA's involvement and ability to be a part of the adoption process, these children, who would have been hard to place because of their medical issues, all found permanent homes. Better yet, their adoptive families are all part of the same church family and have wholeheartedly supported interaction among the siblings.

That's just one success story, and there are countless more. The statistics are remarkable in support of CASA volunteer involvement. In 92 percent of CPS cases where a CASA is assigned, the child finds a permanent home either by being returned to their own home or through adoption. Sadly, 8 percent of the children "age out of the system," meaning they stay in foster care until they are 18 or until they graduate from high school. For these, a CASA can be a true lifeline.

Elliott first became involved with CASA when she and her husband were foster parenting a baby boy. That baby boy had a CASA. Through the fostering experience and up until they were able to adopt, the CASA was involved in the child's life and case. Through that experience, the Elliotts gained a deep respect for CASAs and the CASA ET organization. Because of this, they got involved on the fundraising side, and then first her husband and then Elliott became CASAs. In 2007, Elliott was offered a paid position with the organization as a case supervisor.

"I enjoy telling people about what we do," Elliott said. "Our son was our reason to get involved, but I stay involved because it's become a passion, and the need is great."

For those thinking of volunteering, Elliott says there is not much needed in the way of qualifications. Beyond the

courses and background check, a CASA must be older than 21 and possess a genuine desire to help a child. They must have the ability to remain objective and have the maturity to deal with situations that can be emotional. Volunteers must also possess sensitivity to cultural and ethnic beliefs and preferences, have their own transportation, and live a flexible enough lifestyle to be able to attend court periodically. Finally, a CASA must commit to devoting at least a year to complete their assigned case.

"If anyone even thinks they are interested in volunteering as a CASA, I'd love to talk with them," Elliott said. She says there is plentiful need. Also, even if a person is not able to act as a CASA, there is still plenty that can be done to help, from assisting with the annual fundraiser gala, "Justice is Served," to spending time helping out in the office. Additionally, donations of money and all types of items for services are also gratefully accepted. CASA can always use phone cards and gas cards and even simple luxuries for the children, especially the teens, they serve. Elliott says the teens they serve are just like others. They have some very simple wants, like acne medicine, scented shampoo and conditioner, makeup items, and other toiletries such as deodorant. These items may seem like necessities to most, but to some CASA kids, these items are hard to come by. All donations are tax deductible.

Another time people can help CASA is when they are called to jury duty. In both Smith and Van Zandt District Courts, jurors have the opportunity to donate their jury pay to a few organizations, including CASA. Elliott says that funding stream goes a long way.

CASA for Kids of East Texas is a non-profit entity that serves the children of Smith, Van Zandt and Wood counties and is headquartered at 318 E. Fifth St. in Tyler. Those interested in volunteering or offering donations can call Community Outreach Coordinator Katherine Elliott at (903) 597-7725 or email katherine@casaforkidsofet.org.

To learn more about the organization, visit casaforkidsofet.org.

