



MISSOURI SENATE

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JEFFERSON CITY

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**A Column for the Week
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Court Appointed Special Advocates

JEFFERSON CITY — This year, I won an election that I'm very proud of. No, I didn't go door-to-door, canvassing neighborhoods asking for votes. This time, it was election to the Missouri Court Appointed Special Advocates Board, and its work could be considered as important as any legislative debate I might be engaged in.

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) were created 30 years ago in this country after a judge in Seattle became worried that children in too many abused and neglected cases were being lost in a court system that was just too overburdened. With court resources tight, the idea of using volunteers to help was born. These volunteer advocates are charged with keeping the courts aware of the child's needs and tracking progress to getting that child into a permanent home. They give substantive information to help in that placement.

In Missouri, we have more than 1,000 volunteers who have stepped up to the plate and given of their time and talents to speak for more than 2,600 children who otherwise might not have a voice in these court proceedings. Let me tell you, as a lawyer who has been in a court room many times, you need an advocate there to make sure your rights are protected. For these children, it's even more important as often they are the victims of crimes. And with the family life many times being turned upside down, they might not even have a family member to help them through the process. Although the 1,000 people who have stepped up to volunteer gave more than 85,000 hours of their time last year, there are another 7,000 children in the system who don't have a CASA volunteer.

There are opportunities for you to help out. If you're interested in becoming a CASA volunteer in the 25th Senatorial District, you can contact Angie Wiley at the CASA of Dunklin County in Kennett at (573) 717-1000 (e-mail her at angiewiley@hotmail.com) and Angela Morris at the CASA of the 36th Circuit in Poplar Bluff at (573) 727-9997. You can find other opportunities throughout the state by going to the Missouri CASA web site: www.mocasa.net.

We must ensure that our children have all the protections and services they need and deserve. It is my charge as a new member of the Missouri Court Appointed Special Advocates Board, and it is our responsibility as citizens of this state.

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Senator Robert Mayer represents the people of Wayne, Ripley, Butler, Stoddard, New Madrid, Pemiscot and Dunklin counties in the Missouri Senate.