



# Biennial Report

January 2025

**KENTUCKY CASA NETWORK, INC.**

**CHANGE A  
CHILD'S STORY.™**



## INTRODUCTION

Kentucky CASA Network, Inc. (KCN) is the state Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) association as described in Kentucky Revised Statute (KRS) 620.530(1). CASA advocates are trained community volunteers appointed by judges to represent the best interests of dependent, abused, and neglected children in court (KRS 620.500 et seq.). Local CASA programs are nonprofit organizations that train and supervise CASA volunteers. There are currently 18 local CASA programs and more than 1,350 volunteers across Kentucky.

As the state association, the KCN is directed by statute to provide certain evaluations and recommendations relating to child welfare to the Supreme Court, Governor, Legislative Research Commission, and Cabinet for Health and Family Services in the odd-numbered years. Specifically, KRS 620.535(3) requires the state association to “evaluate and make recommendations” regarding:

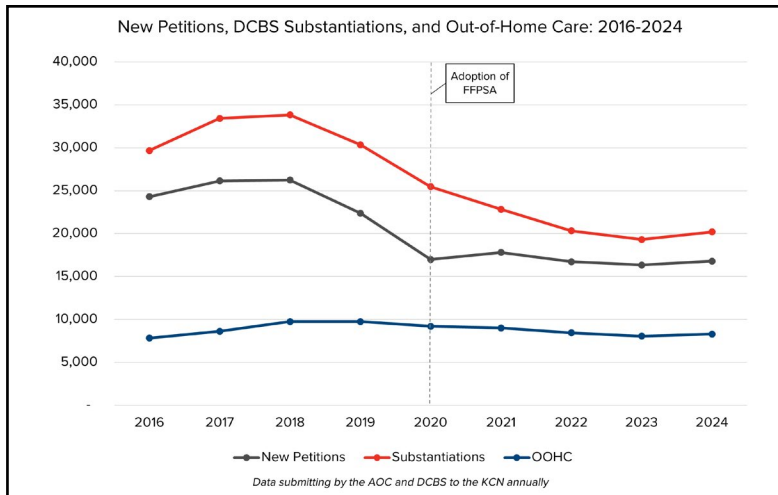
- a. Laws of the Commonwealth and practices, policies, and procedures within the Commonwealth affecting the welfare of children and families; and
- b. The effectiveness, or lack thereof, and the reasons therefore, of local CASA volunteers advocating for placement for the children in the Commonwealth.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND OBSERVATIONS FOR POLICY REFORM AND IMPROVED EFFICIENCIES IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM IN KENTUCKY

### I. Too many children in Kentucky continue to experience foster care

*Evaluation:* Despite a continued trend and significant decrease in Department for Community Based Services (DCBS) substantiations annually in the last ten years, Kentucky’s foster care numbers have not declined at the same rate. The number of children in out-of-home care (OOHC) increased slightly in 2024, as did the number of new petitions (children before the Court).

With the continued large number of children entering care, there continues to be an increased strain on the number of available foster care homes to meet the demand for ongoing, concurrent, and respite foster care. CASA volunteers have also observed that the current strain and high demand on the foster care system can also mean at times there is a lack of quality assessment on placement that may lead to an increase in disruptions.



In 2024, the Children’s Bureau ranked Kentucky fourteenth for incidences of abuse and neglect, a significant decrease from rankings over the past ten years which ranked Kentucky in the top five. The Children’s Bureau data tracks the rate of incidences of substantiated reports and not direct foster care data as related to the population in a particular state. While the drop is a positive trend, Kentucky should not become complacent or interpret that the decreased ranking means there is the same overall decrease in children experiencing foster care in the Commonwealth.

**II. Kentucky’s Subsidized Permanent Custody guardianship program will improve permanency outcomes, reduce the number of overall placements, and provide much needed financial support to fictive kin and relative caregivers**

*Evaluation:* Subsidized Permanent Custody (SPC) is a new program that was rolled out by DCBS in July 2024 for fictive kin and relatives that provides subsidized monthly payments for children who have been placed in an approved relative or fictive kin foster home for six months, and where the permanency goal is not adoption or return to parent. The termination of parental rights does not need to have occurred for these placements to receive the benefit. CASA volunteers have observed and shared in court reports that when placed with fictive kin and relatives, children experience more stability, less trauma, and stronger connections to their community and culture of origin. Immediate placement with a fictive caregiver means fewer placements overall and increases the chances for better mental and behavioral health outcomes and longer-term child well-being. CASA volunteers work closely with these caregivers and facilitate much needed resources and services where they are available.

*Recommendation:* DCBS should effectively promote and communicate SPC to all of its Service Regions and ensure all regions, supervisors, and front-line workers are providing this resource to fictive and relative placements. CASA programs have observed some inconsistency in the utilization and rollout of SPC. DCBS’s Central Office should create communication tools and actively educate its personnel about the program.

### **III. DCBS should evaluate the impact of its rollout of Alternative Response**

Evaluation: Alternative Response is an alternative to a traditional child protection investigation where allegations are screened by using an assessment tool that does not indicate serious harm or require an emergency response by DCBS. It is a different pathway response when a call comes into Central Intake that does not involve a serious allegation of physical or sexual abuse, risk of serious harm, or a child fatality. DCBS has gradually rolled out Alternative Response in the different service regions starting in the fall of 2023 with a complete rollout expected by June 2025. Alternative Response involves connecting families to community resources to prevent court involved activity.

In the initial rollout of Alternative Response, CASA programs have raised serious concerns with the “screening out” of cases, where one DCBS service region has implemented the assessment differently than another region. CASA programs have provided feedback indicating that cases where serious safety concerns exist are not being brought before the court. CASA volunteers have witnessed some of the failings of Alternative Response in at-risk situations with companion cases where a new allegation arises with a sibling; however, the case was screened out and instead should have resulted in the filing of a new petition.

In some regions, a lack of providers does not fully allow the family to receive services they need if a petition was filed in severe cases that warrant court intervention. It also does not allow for the appointment and advocacy of a CASA volunteer to provide best interest advocacy to a child experiencing abuse or neglect. Diverting families away from court involvement is a positive thing, but only if there is a wide array of prevention services to meet the needs of families in need of services.

Central Office, with input from Family Court Judges and stakeholders such as CASA programs, have improved the assessment screening tool to mitigate the risk of “screen outs” that should have resulted in the filing of a petition.

Recommendation: DCBS should continue its comprehensive data collection practices to include analysis of demographic and regional trends in Alternative Response utilization and outcomes. Particularly, in order to mitigate unintended consequences, DCBS should monitor racial disparity trends in Alternative Response cases and cases overridden away from Alternative Response to ensure equitable implementation of policies and to mitigate risk. DCBS should also weigh whether cases are screened out without an adequate build out of community resources and services in which to connect a family seeking service. Social workers, as part of their assessment, should rely on and seek out whether there is any history of a CASA volunteer on a case and/or a companion or sibling case that might provide critical information necessary to the assessment and screening process.

### **IV. Kentucky’s selection as a pilot state for two new programs aimed at reducing family entrance into and involvement with the child welfare system will benefit the state’s at-risk children**

Evaluation: Programs that focus on concrete economic support aimed at prevention are beneficial to reducing the need for family involvement in the child welfare and judicial system.

In March 2024, the Doris Duke Foundation selected Kentucky as one of four pilot sites to fund a three-year initiative called OPT-In for Families (Opportunities for Prevention and Transformation). Pilot sites will be in Kentucky, South Carolina, Oregon, and Washington, D.C. The program is specifically focused on reaching families who get referred to Child Protective Services for “well-being needs rather than safety concerns that do not warrant investigation of neglect or abuse — and who therefore often get no help at all.”

In December 2024, Kentucky was selected as a pilot state for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Work and Family Well-Being program authorized by the bipartisan and bicameral Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023. These states – California, Kentucky, Maine, Minnesota, and Ohio – will have the opportunity to pilot new program performance and accountability measures in the TANF program. TANF is a \$16.5 billion block grant program that provides funds to support cash assistance programs, employment and training assistance, and related services to ensure families can meet basic needs, get access to opportunities in the job market, and remain together. The new TANF Work and Family Well-Being pilot programs present the opportunity to build new evidence for work and well-being outcomes and test whether they lead to stronger employment outcomes and increased family stability and well-being. Kentucky will have the flexibility to customize requirements around employment, training, and other engagement activities to the needs of TANF families to ensure eligible families have access to customized supports and services that result in better employment and family economic well-being outcomes.

*Recommendation:* When families receive the resources they need, risk factors for child abuse and neglect decrease and families have better outcomes for staying together. Keeping families together decreases the strain and financial resources the Commonwealth spends to support these children in foster care. Kentucky policymakers can harness the expertise of child welfare stakeholders to increase system-wide understanding of the correlation between economic supports and child safety so that legislative efforts and judicial practices complement this pilot project’s effort.

## **ON THE HORIZON - WHAT CASA IS FOLLOWING**

### **I. Electronic migration and access to TWIST data**

Integral to the effective role of the CASA volunteer is the ability to access all case and court records pertaining to the petition and case involving the child. This is codified in KRS 620.520(2). Some CASA programs and volunteers are experiencing challenges with access to records because of the migration to electronic records in the TWIST database. DCBS should ensure that supervisors and service region administrators facilitate CASA volunteers’ access to these records. Some regions have DCBS workers provide the full TWIST history in the dispositional report and that information becomes available in the court orders. In those situations, access to TWIST would not be necessary.

*Recommendation:* Provide CASA programs with low-level access to TWIST to ensure all records and information that are provided by Statute are accessible to CASA volunteers.

## **II. The Judicial Court and Attorney Measurements of Performance project**

CASA is part of the local project team of the Administrative Office of the Court's (AOC) Judicial Court and Attorney Measurements of Performance (JCAMP) project. JCAMP assists the AOC with measuring and improving legal and judicial practice related to child welfare. JCAMP is being funded by a project with the Center for State Courts with the goal for evaluating continuous improvement of the judicial community's role in the child welfare system. Specific outcomes that relate to CASA effectiveness and impact will be part of the project.

### **THE ROLE OF THE CASA VOLUNTEER IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM IN KENTUCKY**

CASA volunteers in the Commonwealth of Kentucky play a vital role in many aspects of the child welfare system that include family and juvenile courts, DCBS, and the juvenile justice system. CASA volunteers serve as child advocates providing a much-needed voice for an abused and neglected child caught up in a complex and daunting system through no fault of their own.

CASA volunteers are objective, community-based volunteers who are appointed by judges to serve in child abuse, neglect, and dependency cases. Once assigned to a child, the volunteer has regular in-person visits with the child, researches the child's case, reviews documents, interviews relevant people to the case, and makes a report to the court as to what is in the best interest of the child, in terms of services, placement, visitation, reunification, and permanency. CASA volunteers monitor the child's placement, whether they are in foster care, in relative placement, or remain in their current homes with their biological parents until permanency is achieved. Volunteers are often the only constant the child knows as they move through the labyrinth of the child welfare system. This unique role is one that allows the CASA volunteer and local CASA programs to view the system with a unique lens.

#### **Requirements and Description of a CASA Volunteer in Kentucky**

Volunteers are screened, trained, and supervised by professional staff at local CASA programs. Pursuant to standards from the National CASA/GAL Association for Children and Kentucky statutory provisions, volunteers are required to receive a minimum of 30 hours of initial training, engage in court observation pre-service if possible, and complete 12 hours of continuing education each year.

## STATEWIDE CASA DATA

	CY 2022	CY 2023	CY 2024
Children Served	3,538	3,472	3,376
Assigned Volunteers <sup>1</sup>	1,239	1,211	1,360
New Volunteers Trained	328	289	286

## THE SYSTEM CASA NAVIGATES IN KENTUCKY

	CY 2022	CY 2023	CY 2024
AOC Petitions Filed <sup>2</sup>	16,721	16,347	16,795
Children in DCBS Substantiations <sup>3</sup>	20,324	19,304	20,201

<sup>1</sup> 2024 data: 1,360 total volunteers statewide; 1,170 were assigned to a case

<sup>2</sup> CY 2022, 2023, and 2024 data provided by the Administrative Office of the Courts

<sup>3</sup> CY 2022, 2023, and 2024 data provided by the Department for Community Based Services

## WHERE CASA PROGRAMS ARE LOCATED IN KENTUCKY AS OF JANUARY 2025

Currently, CASA programs serve the following 97 counties in Kentucky:

Allen, Anderson, Ballard, Barren, Bath, Boone, Bourbon, Boyd, Boyle, Bracken, Breckinridge, Bullitt, Butler, Caldwell, Calloway, Campbell, Carlisle, Carroll, Carter, Christian, Clark, Clay, Crittenden, Daviess, Edmonson, Elliott, Estill, Fayette, Fleming, Floyd, Franklin, Fulton, Gallatin, Garrard, Grant, Graves, Grayson, Hancock, Hardin, Harrison, Hart, Henderson, Henry, Hickman, Hopkins, Jackson, Jefferson, Jessamine, Kenton, Knott, Knox, LaRue, Laurel, Lee, Leslie, Letcher, Lincoln, Livingston, Lyon, Madison, Magoffin, Marion, Marshall, Mason, McCracken, McLean, Meade, Menifee, Mercer, Metcalfe, Montgomery, Morgan, Muhlenberg, Nelson, Nicholas, Ohio, Oldham, Owen, Owsley, Pendleton, Perry, Pike, Pulaski, Robertson, Rockcastle, Rowan, Scott, Shelby, Simpson, Spencer, Trigg, Trimble, Union, Warren, Washington, Webster, Woodford

In an effort to bring CASA to all 120 counties, the KCN has deployed a regionalization model to develop and preserve effective and sustainable local CASA programs, ensuring that the cultural and regional needs of the program service area are aligned.





### **CASA OF THE LINCOLN TRAIL**

Serving Marion, Nelson, and Washington Counties  
Kate Broaddus, Executive Director

### **CASA OF THE NORTHERN BLUEGRASS REGION**

Serving Boone, Campbell, Carroll, Gallatin, Grant, Harrison, Kenton, Owen, and Pendleton Counties  
Nicky Jeffries, Executive Director

### **CASA OF THE RIVER REGION**

Serving Bullitt, Henry, Jefferson, Oldham, Shelby, Spencer, and Trimble Counties  
Jamie Noon, CEO

### **CASA OF THE WILDERNESS TRAIL**

Serving Clark, Estill, Lee, Madison, and Owsley Counties  
Victoria Bengé, Executive Director

### **CASA OF WEST KENTUCKY**

*A project of Child Watch Counseling & Advocacy Center*

Serving Ballard, Caldwell, Livingston, Lyon, McCracken, and Trigg Counties  
Janie Criner, Executive Director of Child Watch Counseling & Advocacy Center  
Stephanie Moss, CASA Program Director

### **THE BUFFALO TRACE CASA PROGRAM**

Serving Bracken, Fleming, Mason, Nicholas, and Robertson Counties  
Executive Director: *Vacant*

## **ABOUT THE KCN**

Kentucky CASA Network, Inc. (KCN) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, governed by a board of directors, that provides ongoing development, training, technical assistance, and resources to local CASA programs across Kentucky. The KCN also advocates for the needs and interests of CASA programs and volunteers with industry stakeholders in Frankfort, participates on state child welfare policy-making committees, and advances the CASA mission statewide.

## **MISSION**

The mission of the KCN is to support the development, growth, and continuation of Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) programs in Kentucky. CASA programs recruit and train volunteers to advocate on behalf of children who have come into the court system as a result of dependency, neglect, or abuse.

## **OUR VALUES**

Collaboration \* Service \* Accountability \* Gratitude \* Transparency

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Andrea Bruns  
State Director/CEO

Brittany Garrett  
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Background Check Services Associate

Doug Myers  
Quality Assurance Specialist (Part-Time/Contractor)

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**Kentucky CASA Network, Inc.**

1640 Lyndon Farm Court  
Suite 108  
Louisville, KY 40223

(502) 238-2154



[info@kentuckycasanetwork.org](mailto:info@kentuckycasanetwork.org)

[www.kentuckycasanetwork.org](http://www.kentuckycasanetwork.org)

[facebook.com/kentuckycasanetwork](https://facebook.com/kentuckycasanetwork)