

CASA Critical

Critical Information for CASAs

#22—March-April 2019



Join us May 4, 2019

For our 3rd annual Big Country CASA Superhero 5K/Fun Run!

Advocates: If you haven't signed up to help...or to run...get your cape and come on!

Don't Forget to "Like" us and "Share" us on Facebook!

Gary Douglass named Big Country CASA Executive Director



Gary Douglass has been named as the new Executive Director of Big Country CASA. “I am honored and excited to bring my skills and vision to the Executive Director position at Big Country CASA and build upon the excellent work of CASA’s first Executive Director, Angela Sharp.” Gary said. “I know the tremendous difference CASA can make in the life of a child in the foster care system.”

Gary has a long history of working with children. He has worked in education serving as an instructor and administrator. His experience includes extensive work with at-risk youth including service at Cal Farley’s Boys Ranch and Richard Milburn Academy. Gary has a bachelor’s degree from Abilene Christian University and a master’s degree from West Texas A & M University.

Big Country CASA Legislative Advocacy

Garner Roberts, one of our Big Country CASA volunteers, represents our program by researching and participating in advocacy for legislation. Here is his report after recent activities in which he has been involved: garnerroberts@bigcountrycasa.org

It looks promising at the Capitol in Austin for Taylor County to get an additional associate judge to help manage the growing number of cases involving children and Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. Judge Paul Rotenberry has said our county may have to start dismissing cases if it doesn’t get another associate judge to help handle the case load.

Because Taylor County is requesting another associate judge – not another elected judge such as Paul Rotenberry – it requires only funding from the state, not new legislation. Rep. Stan Lambert told me the annual salary and benefits from the state for this associate judge and his or her clerk would be about \$196,000. (Taylor County would be required to provide courtroom, office space, supplies, etc.) These funds already are in HB1 (House Bill 1, which is the base budget introduced at the beginning of the session in the House of Representatives), but not in SB1 (Senate bill 1, which includes the base budget in the Senate). And that’s not unusual because the Senate usually is more fiscally conservative. I have talked to Dr. Buckingham and her staff, including legislative director Ginny Bell Holloway, and have been assured by them that they are working to get this funding added to SB1. Then, hopefully, this item will remain in both budgets through the session and be included in the final version adopted likely near the end of the session May 27.

Our former executive director, Angela Sharp, others from Big Country CASA, and I have visited with Judge Rotenberry, Dr. Buckingham and Rep. Lambert about this funding. I also attended CASA Day at the Capitol February 5 and personally visited with Sen. Buckingham and Rep. Lambert to advocate for CASA and this funding. Stan, of course, strongly supports CASA and this additional money for Taylor County (Stan’s sister is a CASA volunteer in another county). I was among a group of CASA volunteers from Travis County and elsewhere in her district who visited with Dr. Buckingham. She supports CASA and thanked the group for its services to the children of Texas. That afternoon I had an extended visit with Holloway. She said Dr.

Buckingham had written each of the 15 members of the Senate finance committee, including Sen. Charles Perry of Lubbock, to express support for this funding to be added to SB1. They also are in contact with Sen. Joan Huffman of Houston, chair of the subcommittee that is considering this specific funding request.

Perhaps the best “news” from my conversation with Ginny was that funding for the nine new courts/judges is being requested in this session together in Article IV of SB1, and the nine new courts/judges include not only this one for Taylor County but also one for the hometown of the new speaker of the Texas House of Representatives, Rep. Dennis Bonnen of Angleton. So, I’m thinking the new speaker is not going to allow that line item in the budget to fail. Obviously, this funding merits passing in the budget on its own, but also now it should get added support from the speaker because it’s coupled with funding for his home district. Ginny also said the state’s all-important Office of Courts Administration (OCA) supports this funding and has given it high priority.

I also visited the Capitol offices of Sen. Buckingham (staff members Madison Kieschnick and Catherine Seabaugh) and Rep. Lambert (staff members Robyn Wertheim, Seth Juergens and Caleb Goodman) the morning of January 22. That afternoon I visited briefly with both Sen. Buckingham and Rep. Lambert at a reception in the governor’s mansion (the primary reason for my visit to Austin; I knew they both were scheduled to attend this reception, so I took advantage by getting an invitation from my lobbyist son). And I also didn’t pass up a chance to talk to our most gracious First Lady of Texas, Cecilia Abbott, about CASA.

Certainly, this is not the only reason for legislative advocacy during this 86th session of the Texas legislature. Our state has the nation’s largest CASA organization, and I’m told the CASA network is the largest volunteer network in Texas. Current state funding for CASA is \$13.2 million per year, and Texas CASA has asked for an additional \$2.25 million in the new budget for HHSC for a total of \$15.445 million per year. But only the same \$13.2 million is included in HB1 and SB1 so there’s some work to do here.

In addition to funding requests, Texas CASA also is proposing new DFPS policies, including

- foster care ombudsman and higher education foster care liaisons,
- services for older and transitioning foster youth (STAR Health eligibility),
- better understanding of trauma and use of trauma-informed care,
- better support for children and families dealing with substance abuse and mental health issues,
- improve educational outcomes for children in state care (school discipline issues and recommendations from PAL reform group),
- protect children’s property during placement changes (and IDs and driver’s licenses),
- help prevent human trafficking,
- ensure that all youth exiting care have a copy of their insurance card and health care information.

Your elected officials always are interested in hearing from people in their district about these and other issues. Write Stan and Dawn about your concerns. And let me or Gary Douglass know if you’re interested in joining our legislative advocacy team. Please let me know if you would like more details about any of these issues.

The Honorable Dawn Buckingham, Texas Senate, P.O. Box 12068, Austin, TX 78711, 512.463.0124

The Honorable Stan Lambert, Texas House of Representatives, P.O. Box 2910, Austin, TX 78768, 512.463.0718

Refer your family and friends for CASA training!

Summer 2019—June Daytime Flex Training

Monday	June 3	9:00 – 10:30 a.m. (books & instructions)
Wednesday	June 5	9:00 – 12:00
Friday	June 7	9:00 – 12:00
Monday	June 10	9:00 – 12:00
Wednesday	June 12	9:00 – 12:00
Friday	June 14	9:00 – 12:00

(FLEX Online training: 15 hours classroom, 15 hours home/online)

Confidential Companion Training

Tuesday, April 23, 2019 –3:30-5:30 p.m.

CASA Training Room

Big Country CASA is officially a recipient of the *Amazon Smile* program. If you are a regular Amazon shopper, go to **smile.amazon.com** and you will be prompted to select a charity. Each time you select Big Country CASA as you shop, we receive a portion of the total purchase. Shop away!

Remember that all advocates began with a clean CEU slate on **January 1, 2019**. Your supervisor will track your CEUs by the calendar year instead of the date you were sworn in as a CASA. Each advocate needs to gain 12 hours of continuing education by December 31, 2019.

Birthday boxes for CASA kids-- We are so excited about our new partnership with *Together We Rise*, who has provided us with Birthday Boxes for our children. Our CASAs will now be able to provide boxes full of candy, balloons, party supplies, and gift cards to help celebrate their special day! Each box is decorated and has a handwritten note from organizations across the U.S. who have chosen to focus their team building or service project on helping children in foster care. We have 40 boxes available at the office for you to pick up for your CASA child's birthday



Marcy Toppert receives the Volunteer of the Quarter award for Winter 2018 from her supervisor Rob Marcelain at the March Board of Directors meeting. Also pictured is Janet Ardoyno, Board president.



Lothare Smith and Emily Breninger shared their CPS experiences at CASA Café April 9. Lothare praised her CASA Terry Shira (and her husband Charles) for their work in her case—her children were returned to her home. Emily and her husband Michael have adopted children through CPS and also had CASAs on their cases.

CHAMPION FOR CHILDREN—HEART OF THE CHAMPION AWARD!

Angela Sharp, founding executive director of Big Country CASA, received the “Heart of the Champion Award” at the 20th anniversary Champion for Children luncheon on March 21. Cited for her vision, integrity, and organizational skills, Angela was surprised by the award and was surrounded by the BCCASA staff and members of the board.



Fear of failure is a strong motivator for this “Heart of the Champion” nominee: Failing the kids in Taylor County foster care is not an option. Passion for her work as Big Country CASA Executive Director comes from the absolute knowledge that we are all working for what is in the best interest of the child. Our work, our advocacy, our activism and our collaborative voices ensure that someday all children will have safe, secure, permanent homes. Overseeing the staff and volunteers who advocate for children in the CPS system has motivated Angela Sharp to keep working, to do more for children and youth in Taylor County...as she has done since she was named the first Executive Director of Big Country CASA in September 2015. Starting with 12 volunteers, Angela has played a significant role as that number has grown to 136 volunteers.

CASA has not served all the children in our county, but Angela has been successful in securing ample funds from diverse resources to keep the local program thriving and, more recently, flourishing. At the close of 2018, Big Country CASA was the fastest-growing CASA program in the state of Texas. With fierce attention to detail and an unsurpassed integrity, Angela Sharp has challenged CASA staff and volunteers to be the voice for children in a broken world. She has done this through challenges and opportunities, with God guiding her each step as she follows his message to “keep your eyes on the children.” We’re at 403 children...and counting!

Angela’s tenure with Big Country CASA came to an official end on March 18, 2019, as she moved with her husband to Sherman. Angela Sharp, you ARE our “Heart of the Champion”!