

A World of Difference: Mateo's Story

Fourteen-year-old Mateo* spent 10 years in foster care and lived in at least 10 different placements. In 2020, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, he was living in a residential treatment center (RTC), secluded from his family, friends, and everyone else he had known and loved as a child.

It was at this time that Big Country CASA volunteer Michael Jones was appointed to advocate for him. Today, less than a year later, Mateo is living with family members and looking forward to starting a new school year in his hometown. He's been reconnected with aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents and more – 40+ family members!

When Michael first met him, Mateo was "not much of a talker," Michael said. Michael quickly realized that the best way to get to know him was by bonding through sports.

"What I discovered with Mateo is that if you got him physically doing something—playing basketball, shooting pool—he'd open up a little bit," Michael said. **"I'd just start asking him about his life, and every time I went to visit him, I'd learn a little more."**

During one of his visits to Mateo's residential treatment center, Michael and Mateo completed some Collaborative Family Engagement (CFE) tools. The goal of CFE is to find and engage family members and family friends who may be able to provide support. Using these tools, Mateo was able to identify names of people he remembered from 10+ years ago who he wanted to reconnect with. Michael's CASA supervisor, Wendy Hollabaugh, helped create a 40+ person list of potential people to reach out to. Since then, Wendy has been reaching out to Mateo's family on both parents' sides, one by one, to re-engage them.

Michael and Wendy's family-finding efforts quickly proved themselves fruitful. In early July, Mateo moved out of the RTC he had been in for the past two years to live with his aunt, Marie,* in a familiar community. He is set to start

his freshman year of high school in the school district he first attended, and he is excited to reconnect with old friends. To assist him with the transition from the RTC to public school, Michael helped get Mateo signed up for football camp—something the two had been talking about for a while.

"He's very excited about going back to school here," Michael said. "I want him to be happy, I want him to be in football, I want him to be involved in school and be as normal of a teenager as he possibly can be."

Besides being fun and keeping him active and healthy, **football will help Mateo reconnect with old friends and make new ones.**

Mateo has two siblings: a younger sister, Rita,* and an older brother, Andrew.* Andrew and Mateo have been able to stay connected, mostly through letters, with Michael's help. About a month ago, the two brothers had a phone call—the first time they had spoken to each other in nearly two years. Rita's adoptive parents are not currently allowing her to have contact with her siblings, but Michael and Wendy are hopeful that this will change. Mateo's father is currently out of the picture, but everyone on the case is hopeful that he can rebuild a positive, healthy relationship with his mother.

Mateo's case is still open. But now, instead of struggling to survive, he is making new relationships, trying extracurricular activities and anticipating a new school year.

Whatever happens for Mateo, Michael and Wendy will be there to support him, every step of the way.

This story was published and shared across the Texas CASA Network and with our partner, Connect Our Kids.

**Names changed for privacy.*



Michael Jones

ANNUAL IMPACT REPORT FY21

Big Country CASA

September 1, 2020 – August 31, 2021



Change a child's story.™

40

new volunteers
trained this year

149

volunteers who served
children this year

386

children served this year

7,853

hours donated
by volunteers

>\$1
million*

estimated total savings to Taylor County

*based on volunteer hours served by CASA volunteers that otherwise would have been represented by attorneys at Taylor County's expense

64,096

miles driven by volunteers

The majority of children removed from Taylor County are moved to homes and facilities outside of the county. National CASA mandates that children have face-to-face contact with their CASA advocate regularly, so out of county placements result in our staff and volunteers driving across the state to ensure the safety and well-being of these children.

INTERESTED IN BECOMING A CASA VOLUNTEER? CONTACT US!

BigCountryCASA.org | 325-677-6448 | 400 Oak Street, Suite 217, Abilene, Texas 79602

FOSTER CARE SIMULATION

Have you ever wondered what it's like to be a kid in foster care? Big Country CASA is always seeking opportunities to increase the awareness of the needs and challenges of children who have been removed from their home. Similar to poverty simulations, Big Country CASA will be hosting a *foster care simulation* in early 2022. Partners and community members will experience what it is like to play a role in the child welfare system. CASA's hope is that through this experiential glimpse into the foster care system, our volunteers and community partners will be better equipped to empathize with and serve the children in foster care in Taylor County.

COLLABORATIVE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

"Family is forever" is a phrase often used to describe the endurance of family bonds. Sadly, for kids in the child welfare system, this hasn't always been their experience. The goal of collaborative family engagement (CFE) is to increase a child's support network through connections with their extended family. In the past fiscal year, BCC has placed an emphasis on the importance of CFE by creating the position of CFE coordinator. Over the past year, 24 families have benefited from these services; our hope is to serve twice that number this coming year. To see a specific example of CFE's impact, read Mateo's story on the back page.



ELLA

Many of us have pictures from childhood to look back on with fond memories, and we want our CASA children to have the same experience. Big Country CASA is partnering with 2iNgage to create *Lifebooks* for our CASA children. While searching for the best options to organize our efforts, we discovered a digital program called *Ella*. A Lifebook is an essential tool to aid children in the child welfare system in understanding the narrative of their lives and maintaining a connection to their identity through all the changes they are experiencing. We are excited to offer this tool to help our children collect and protect memories of their life that they can carry with them into adulthood!



NATIONAL CASA GRANT

Big County CASA is proud to announce the receipt of our **SECOND** competitive National CASA grant. These funds will help our organization improve outcomes for children by deepening our advocacy while continuing to recruit new volunteers to serve children. We will specifically be focusing on assessing the well-being of youth ages 14 and over, which comprises over 40% of the children we serve.

"The abuse or neglect of one child can impact not only that child, but that child's siblings and future generations of that family. What may start as one abused or neglected child can increase to several generations if the cycle is not broken. Assisting those children and families that have suffered abuse or neglect is a critical step for our community to help break the cycle of abuse. Big Country CASA is on the front line in helping our community address this critical issue."

— Judge April Propst,
Child Protection Court Taylor County

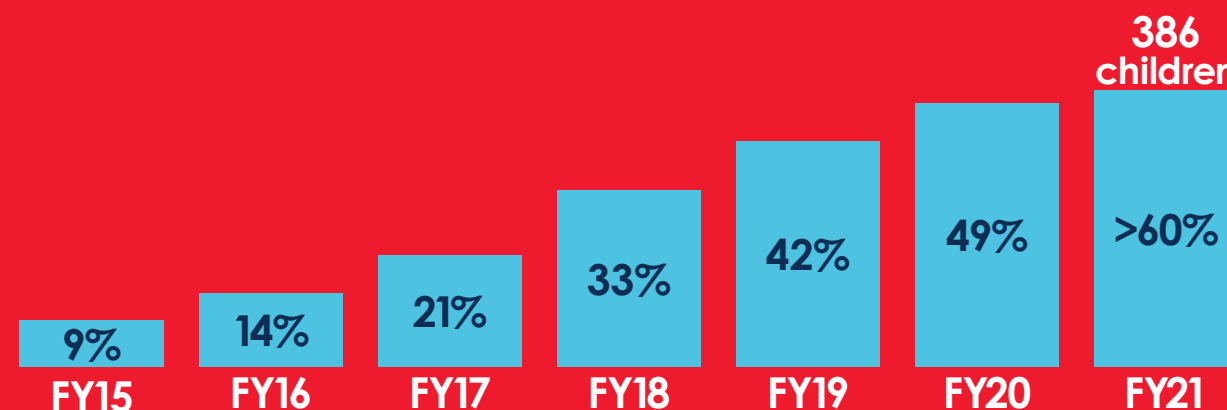


DEFENDERS CAMPAIGN

There is an immediate need for male volunteers to be role models for the youth in our community. Big Country CASA and Big Brothers Big Sisters have teamed up to recruit and train the men of our community who have a passion for helping the next generation become the best version of themselves. We call this project the "Defenders" campaign.

In 2021 we had several very successful events at local establishments including Abilene Axe, Grain Theory, and Play Faire Park Putt Putt. We want to engage the men of our community and support local businesses at the same time. Like us on Facebook and Instagram @BigCountryCASA to keep up with what fun events we will be hosting next!

CHILDREN SERVED IN TAYLOR COUNTY BY BIG COUNTRY CASA



Big Country CASA provided volunteers for over 60% of children with open child welfare cases during the fiscal year, totaling 386 children. While our goal is to serve 100% of the children in care, we are thankful to the community for helping us reach this milestone.

WHY I VOLUNTEER...

"I volunteer because I cannot imagine a more vulnerable child than one who must be placed in foster care. By definition, that means there is not a trustworthy adult in that child's life, no one to protect and provide for that child. I cannot make a difference in every child's life, but I can make a difference in one child's life."

— Jean Goodnight

My favorite part of being a CASA is:
"knowing that I have made a difference."

