July Newsletter

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As we prepare to celebrate our nation’s independence and freedom, let us consider that “independence” and “freedom” are experienced in many different ways. While the majority of us take for granted the freedom that independence allows us, there is another side of independence and freedom that can be very scary for youth on verge of aging out of foster care.

Annually, in Iowa, nearly 400 children will age out of the foster care system. These are youth who have experienced trauma via abuse and/or neglect by their family, were placed into the care and custody of the state, and for whom a safe, nurturing permanent home was not realized. And like every other child in the country, once they turn 18 they are considered an adult. However, unlike the majority of the other children turning into young adults, foster kids aging out are doing it alone and facing a myriad of issues. An overwhelming number of them will not graduate from high school, will at some point be homeless or lack safe, stable housing and less than 3% of them will earn a college degree. They are unprepared to face the demands of adulthood and are often financially destitute. While they thought that once they reached 18, they would be “free” to make their own choices and decision, they quickly realize that freedom they longed for comes with all of the responsibilities of adulthood. Services and supports they received while in foster care vanish upon their 18th birthday if they did not opt for continuing transitional, and they can quickly find themselves overwhelmed and lacking support.
But it doesn’t have to be that way.

The good news, of course, comes with a call to action! This is, after all, the Recruitment segment of the newsletter.

Fortunately for you and for the youth of Iowa, CASA saw a need and filled it. Fostering Futures is a training required for Advocates who serve youth 14+. This curriculum educates Advocates on using Possible Selves, a method of engaging youth in envisioning and achieving the future they want.

If you are interested in working with youth or are currently working with youth and have not yet taken the Fostering Futures training, please contact your local Coordinator to register for the next training in your area, and help us help youth successfully transition to adulthood.

(excerpted from the Jul 5, 2012 blog post Freedom can be frightening for youth in foster care By Janet Rodriguez)

Have a safe and happy Independence Day!
The arms of a soldier, embracing our flag, which enshrouds a baby.

This image portrays protection, security, and an inherent peace which has been provided by brave men and women of our country, for our country. It is a firm belief that when our country has fought, it was undertaken for these deep principles – protection, security, and peace.

As we celebrate Independence Day, it is interesting to note a few historic significant details. The American Revolutionary War was incited by a few seemingly inconsequential brave individuals who had predetermined what the outcome of their patriotic uprising would be, and committed to it against all odds. It was determined that signing the Declaration of Independence was extremely dangerous – a treasonable act, punishable by death; and yet it was indeed signed. And although it was signed on July 4, 1776, only one year after the war had begun, it is a curious fact that the American Revolutionary War raged on over seven more years after independence had been declared.

CASA Advocates and FCRB Members are brave individuals who make a similar declaration when they commit to step into the lives of children and stand behind every abused and neglected child they serve. They are on the front lines, helping others see the truth and the needs of children and families that come before the Court. The work which keeps them up at night, makes them question humanity, and seek goodness in ugly places often makes them feel like this is a battle that can’t be won. But they still declare their own predetermined victory as they represent to a child, “I’m on your side. You have a right to protection and provision.”

John Adams said, “You will never know how much it has cost my generation to preserve your freedom. I hope you will make good use of it.” Thank you to all the courageous men and women who have stood and continue to stand in defense of our country.

And thank you to those of you who carry an unseen banner, up what seems to be an insurmountable hill, and plant it firmly in the hearts of those who bear witness, which says “No more child abuse – for this one….and this one....and this one....and this one...”
FCRB Program Updates

Local Foster Care Review Boards Reinstated

The past three months have not been easy for staff and volunteers and we recognize the impact the five local board suspensions had on the children who did not receive a citizen administrative review during that time. As we embark on the new fiscal year, we are pleased to announce the previously suspended local foster care review boards (Bremer Cluster, Cedar-Muscatine, Henry-Louisa, Des Moines and Lee) have been reinstated with some modifications as needed to maintain FCRB coverage in the same 50 counties. One significant change included merging the Henry-Louisa and Des Moines LFCRBs. Additionally local CAB staff will resume the majority of FCRB facilitation across the state and some coordinator responsibilities have shifted among staff. The map shows the 50 counties and 28 boards that will continue to provide citizen reviews in FY’18.

Through this restructuring process, we’ve encountered the resignation of some long-term volunteers. We share in the disappointment that budget cuts have resulted in these program changes. The commitment of our volunteers, past and present, is an essential component of the FCRB Program. Together we can work to enhance the lives of children growing up in the foster care system and ensure that they have case plans that not only address legal permanency but relational permanency as well.
**Annual Policy and Procedure Release**

The 2017 Policy and Procedure manual will be released and electronically provided to local Board Members in July. Key additions include:
- Weapons Policy
- Board Safety Policy

All Board Members will be required to submit an acknowledgement letter indicating receipt of the manual and understanding of its contents. If you have questions about any policies, please contact your local coordinator.

**Coming soon: Updated Facilitation materials**

The Facilitator Handbook and Facilitator Refresher Training materials will be provided to all staff, volunteer and contract facilitators. Web-based sessions will be scheduled in July to review the materials and answer any questions facilitators have about the process and expectations. During the course of this next year, there will be more emphasis and collaboration with stakeholders to improve the quality and enhance the value of foster care reviews. There are some initial steps we can take now to put us in position to continue the development phase which will be covered during the Refresher Training. Watch for more details via email.

**E-File Pilot Evaluation**

In June, we completed four months of the e-file pilot with eight (8) review boards. At this time, we are in the process of evaluating the pilot. A survey link was emailed to Facilitators and Board Members to gather input about the partial electronic/paper copy case files. **Please complete the survey by July 7th.** The pilot workgroup will be invited to participate in a conference call meeting in July to review the survey results and provide feedback regarding the process and ways to improve it for ease of use by Facilitators and Board Members.

Stay tuned in the months ahead for further program updates and an overview of the e-file evaluation results. As we continue to face challenges in state government, it is important to explore the most efficient and cost-effective methods to complete the important work of local review boards. Volunteers bring invaluable experience and insight to the process and we find ourselves in a critical time where citizen oversight can provide a unique perspective to the issues facing children in the foster care system.
Trainer’s Corner:

For CASA & FCRB Advocates: Celebrating our Freedom to be Different

ICAB strives to uphold the value of diversity. Valuing differences makes us a stronger organization. Different viewpoints, different personalities, different work styles, different experiences, even different values, when combined together, represent the mosaic landscape of the Iowa Child Advocacy Board.

As we celebrate Freedom in the United States we can remind ourselves to appreciate encountering people that are different than us. We can ask ourselves to look how we treat one another and differences as our personal and collective story of how much we value diversity. One way that ICAB and our volunteers demonstrate the value of diversity in our advocacy efforts is by honoring a child’s own diversity.

How does diversity impact the Iowa child welfare system?

In a 2012 report to the Iowa Department of Human Services which addresses disproportionate minority challenges in the Child Welfare System, the authors outline the critical need to assess Iowa’s demographic profile on an annual basis to plan for culturally responsive services. Iowa Code Section Chapter 2 regarding CINA proceedings states that the services provided should be sensitive to cultural diversity.

The report outlines that the population of children in Iowa is becoming more diverse, ethnically and economically, and is more likely to become urban than ever before. To read more about this report, go to https://dhs.iowa.gov/sites/default/files/Annual_Report.pdf. In order to meet children’s best interests, all agencies and individuals that have contact with the child welfare system need to become more aware of the issues related to cultural responsiveness, disparities, and disproportionality. Without an increase in awareness and proactive efforts to become more culturally responsive to an ever changing Iowa landscape, we fail in our attempts to appropriately meet the needs of many different children and families.

“To be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, But to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.”

~Nelson Mandela

“Freedom” by abfagames
What can we do as ICAB Staff, as CASA Advocates or FCRB Board Members?

Keep an open, nonjudgmental mind while advocating for children from families different than your own.

Be invested in learning more about differences in all categories of life: culture, traditions, values, gender roles, occupations, geographic locations and any number of other ways.

Participate in training events, roundtable discussions and community presentations related to enhancing cultural competencies.

Attend diverse community events, culturally diverse arts and humanities demonstrations and embrace the opportunity to converse with someone new.

Practice setting aside your personal values and "walk a mile in another's shoes" outside of your workplace or volunteer role.

For additional information:

Watch Videos: To learn more, click on the links or cut and paste into your browser:


What do you choose today?

As a Reminder: For more information, resources and related articles on Freedom and honoring differences, watch for regular posts on our state Facebook page throughout the month of July. https://www.facebook.com/CASAIOWA/
CASA Program to Make Substantial Changes After Budget Cuts

Many state agencies took a substantial budget cut for Fiscal Year 2018, and ICAB is no exception. Between the cuts made at the legislative level and the increases in costs such as employee health insurance, our agency has seen an impact of over $550,000 decrease or approximately 21% “hit” to our annual budget since 2014. These budget cuts and increases in expenses have created an environment where statewide CASA programming is no longer sustainable.

Through a very tough decision-making process, ICAB’s management staff decided to suspend CASA Programming to 54 Iowa Counties. What does this mean? We will no longer be recruiting CASA Advocates or accepting new case assignments from the court in these 54 counties. Creating a focus on 45 of our most productive counties helps our local coordinators by allowing more time in locations where a greater population of children and advocates exist and doesn’t require a great deal of “windshield time.”

Many of the 54 suspended counties have at least one active case with a CASA Advocate. Our staff will continue to support these advocates until case closure. Advocates who are not presently assigned to a case will be asked if they’d like to serve in another county or perhaps they have different talents they can offer to our agency such as data entry, recruitment/networking abilities or a talent for public speaking.

For our Advocates and Coaches in these 54 counties, your coordinator will be visiting with you about your options moving forward. For our community partners, your local Coordinator will be sending correspondence regarding this plan and his/her thoughts on moving forward with current cases.

Although this change has left some heavy clouds over our agency, there is a silver lining. Friends of Iowa CASA continues to raise more and more funds each year to supplement our state appropriation. Also in FY2018, specialized staff will help local coordinators apply for local grants. These grant funds could be used for a number of purposes such as recruitment activities or hiring of administrative assistants. Finally, a focused effort on becoming a Service Enterprise Initiative Agency will help all staff work through the process of integrating volunteers at all levels of our agency, not just in direct advocacy roles. All of these efforts will help ICAB expand programming again in the (hopefully very near) future.
If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to reach out to your local Coordinator or Amy Carpenter, Iowa CASA Program Manager at 866-923-1083 or amy.carpenter@dia.iow.gov

CASA Advocacy Reminders

CASA Advocates and Coaches, please take a look at these advocacy reminders and quick refresher. It is important to remember that there are many facets to the role of the Advocate and with that comes a number of core responsibilities when fulfilling your role.

Visiting CASA children

*Summer months find us all even busier than normal!* It continues to be critical for Advocates to see their assigned CASA child(ren) at least once every 30 days. Sometimes there are variables or barriers that prevent this from happening. If you know that you cannot meet with your CASA child in a given month please communicate with your coach or staff supervisor accordingly. There may be other ways to make contact and maintain that consistent connection.

Court Appearances

As you know, attendance at court hearings is a crucial piece of an Advocate’s role. This is the point where you can verbally advocate for your CASA child(ren) and present your work. Tips:

- Ensure that your presence is made known at court. You can approach the GAL and/or Assistant County Attorney and re-introduce yourself prior to the hearings. This makes them aware of your presence. If you have additional information since the time your report was filed, this is a good time to make them aware of the information. They can assist in making sure you are heard during the hearing.

- If you have your CASA name badge, please wear it for court appearances. This helps others recognize you and your role in the case.

- If the Judge does not acknowledge your presence at the onset of the hearing when identifying those individuals present in the courtroom, raise your hand and when called upon by the Judge, introduce yourself for the record.

- Dress appropriately for court. There is no expectation that you appear in business professional attire such as dresses, suits, etc.; however, business casual is appropriate. Remember you are there representing the best interests of the child(ren). Appropriate attire presents a visual image and sends a message that the Advocates are professional.

- Be versed in your report and recommendations in case you are called upon to answer questions about your report.

CASA Reports – Value Added

Judges and other parties are looking for information about the children and case that aren’t always routinely included in other
reports and case plans filed with the court. CASA reports should not be a “regurgitation” of what has been provided by DHS, providers or attorneys.

Some key elements to consider when gathering information between reports:

1. Be aware of what the next hearing type is and build your investigative plan to gather pertinent information for the next hearing.

2. School aged children – remember to talk to teachers to gather information about the child's educational stability and success, behaviors in the classroom, concerns and strengths they see day to day.

3. Children in placements (foster care, relative care or group homes) – talk to staff or caregivers to gather information about the child's day to day activities, behaviors, contact they are having with parents and/or siblings where appropriate, opportunities for establishing social connections or engaging in extracurricular activities.

4. Medical and Substance Abuse Information – remember to obtain a release to gather medical (physical and mental health) and substance abuse information for either the child and/or parent.

5. Use fact-based, concrete examples in your reports to convey your observations. Appeal to the senses which means conveying examples that lead the reader to visualize, feel, hear and perhaps even smell the situation as you observed it and described it in your report.

6. Remember reports need to be free of bias, opinions and judgments.

Thank you, thank you, thank you for all you do for Iowa's children. Again, if you have any questions on this information, please feel free to reach out to your local Coordinator.
As a result of necessary reorganization for the upcoming fiscal year, a few CAB staff will have new work assignments and are a “new face” to many Advocates, Coaches and Board Members. We are grateful to have committed staff who adapt to changes and continue to put forth their best efforts to continue volunteer and program management where needed.

Melissa Loehr is currently a CASA Coordinator for Clay, Dickinson and Kossuth counties and FCRB Coordinator for Clay, Dickinson, Emmet, Kossuth, O’Brien, Osceola and Palo Alto. Beginning in July, she will assume additional FCRB coordinator and facilitator responsibilities for Buena Vista, Cherokee and Ida counties. She has been with CAB for three and half years.

Melissa lives in Spencer with her husband (Trevor) and their two children Hana (4 yrs) and Theo (15 months) and their German Shepherd dog Bear (2 1/2) :) She grew up in Milford and her degree is from BVU in Social Work. Melissa previously provided in home services for Lutheran Services in Iowa and also was the Targeted Case Management Supervisor at Seasons Center working with adults and children with severe mental illness and intellectual disabilities.

A note from Melissa, “I am so excited to meet you and get to know you. First, I hope you know the work you are doing is very important! We are advocating for the most vulnerable children in the state. I have such a passion for the boards and I hope that you will see that as you work with me.”

Crystal Engstrom has worked for CAB for nine years and has worked in or covered 17 different counties. In 2015, Crystal was assigned as the CASA Coordinator for the Fort Dodge area and in her words, she “gained hard working, committed advocates that she continues to enjoy working with today.” With the recent restructuring and inability to fill a coordinator position left vacant upon a staff retirement, Crystal’s coverage area has shifted and she will be the CASA Coordinator for Webster, Hamilton, Cerro Gordo, Floyd and Mitchell counties. She will also provide oversight and support to Calhoun, Pocahontas, Wright, Bremer and Butler advocates who remain on cases.

Crystal shares the following, “I am really excited to get to know everyone and reacquaint myself with the area. After receiving my degree from UNI in Social Work one of my first "real" jobs was working as an In-home (FSRP) provider in Mason City. Then I worked for DHS in the Algona area for 5 years, many times we would have meetings and
training in Mason City so taking on this area is a little like going home for me and I am really looking forward to it. Advocates commitment and dedication to the kids we serve never ceases to amaze me and is what drives program success. Change is never easy but I have been blessed with great advocates that have made this ride smooth and have allowed me to truly enjoy the work I do.”

**Teresa Barnes** has been a CASA/FCRB Coordinator since 2008. She has covered many counties near and far from her hometown of Ackley. Most recently, Teresa is the FCRB Coordinator for the Benton-Iowa-Tama FCRB and she has been a CASA Coordinator for Benton, Iowa, Linn and Tama counties. Through the reorganization, she will transition away from CASA coordination in Iowa and Linn counties and assume Hardin, Marshall and Story CASA programming in FY18. Teresa will continue to provide oversight and support to advocates in Iowa County until their cases close; some Linn County advocates will transfer to local Linn County coordinator, Jennifer Gericke.

Teresa shares the following, “I want to personally thank each and every volunteer I have had the opportunity to work with. You are all amazing advocates who are so dedicated and committed to our work at ICAB and the children whom you serve. I have no doubt that with strong advocates behind us, our program will continue to grow when we are able to expand. I am looking forward to meeting new advocates and to continue growth in each county! Thanking you all so very much for rolling with the changes within ICAB while providing your dedication to the children whom you serve.”

Some of the transitions have already occurred. All advocates and coaches can expect to receive some form of communication from the new coordinator in the next couple weeks as they begin to get acclimated to their newly assigned areas. We hope the transitions go as seamlessly as possible for staff and advocates and look forward to continuing advocacy services in these counties.