

Contact: Alexis Minie, CASA of Ventura County

Direct Phone: (805) 389-3120

Email: [info@casaofventuracounty.org](mailto:info@casaofventuracounty.org)

Website: [www.casaofventuracounty.org](http://www.casaofventuracounty.org)

## ***COMMENTARY***

### Putting Children First

Teresa Romney, Executive Director, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of Ventura County

In the midst of the nation's political debate over border security that dominates the headlines, children are suffering. An 8-year-old boy died in U.S. custody early Christmas Day, not long after the death of a 7-year-old girl seeking asylum with her father. We read these extremely troubling stories knowing that thousands of children are being housed in detention centers around our nation. These are the same kind of "emergency shelters" that our own community's foster children experience when they are taken away from their parents.

Our hearts go out to all vulnerable children caught in these circumstances. How can we protect them and keep them safe? How can we provide them the stability that all children need and deserve?

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of Ventura County are volunteers sworn to do just that. They are trained to work with kids who have been placed in foster care, under the protection of the Children's Court, because they have been abused or neglected.

CASA's challenge in California is the number of children, 77,000, in our state's foster care system. These children are in foster care because they have suffered abuse or neglect by their parents. They are away from their homes, their friends, their schools, and all that is familiar.

They are placed in emergency shelters and then moved to individual or group foster homes, often far away, and usually among complete strangers.

Nearly half of these children are under the age of five. The effects of extreme early-life trauma are significant. Infants and toddlers are the fastest growing age group coming into foster care in California. It's not just the defenselessness of these young ones that is so poignant, but the hidden and potential lifelong impact of mistreatment at such an early age. Environment is critical for infants. Besides needing supportive physical contact and caring stimulation, they are sensitive to conflict in the home such as arguing, shouting, and angry physical contact—sometimes directed at them. This exposure causes babies to have elevated levels of cortisol, the stress hormone. Heightened cortisol can lead to diminished cognitive, motor, and language functioning as well as major behavioral consequences later on.

Child abuse happens in families at all socioeconomic levels, with all educational backgrounds, and from every walk of life. No community is immune. There is physical abuse, sexual abuse or exploitation, negligence, or maltreatment at the hands of parents or caregivers. Often, a concerned neighbor, teacher, or medical professional notices something amiss or troubling about a child and reports it to Child Protective Services or local law enforcement. What comes next is removal from the unsafe situation, and placement in foster care.

This is the crisis that we in Ventura County face every day: how to keep foster children of all ages safe, provide them the support and advocacy they need, and give them the opportunity to thrive. We must put every child's well-being first, just as we would our own. Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) are community volunteers and sworn officers of the court who are specially trained by CASA of Ventura County to work one-on-one with children in foster care.

Our challenge in Ventura County is to help these children and find ways to move them into loving, permanent "forever families" so that they can thrive. In fact, anyone can have a positive impact on these children. Further information on donating or volunteering is at [www.casaofventuracounty.org](http://www.casaofventuracounty.org). There are no special qualifications to volunteer—only the desire to help a child. CASA volunteers work one-on-one with the child, to give a boy or girl a consistent adult who truly cares. It is an opportunity to change a young life.

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CASA volunteers do heroic work. They become the lifeline, the beacon, the anchor for abused and neglected children, and help find them safe, permanent homes.

CASA of Ventura County

PO Box 1135

Camarillo, CA 93011

(805) 389-3120

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