



Cook Named Jefferson County CASA Program Coordinator

By Sandy Zabokrtsky
Staff Writer

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) for children has a new face in Jefferson County. Don Cook has been appointed the new Program Coordinator for Jefferson County.

CASA has been active in Fairbury for the past two years, with funding through the federal government, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention as well as having Jefferson County contributions locally as well as accepting private donations.

According to CASA, statistics there are an estimated 1,900 children who are victims of abuse or neglect on a daily basis with four of them dying every day. CASA volunteers are appointed by judges to watch over and



Don Cook

advocate for these abused and neglected children, making sure they don't get lost in the legal and social service system or are placed in inappropriate group or foster homes. CASA volunteers are often the one constant adult presence in these children's lives.

CASA has been serving the Jefferson County youth by using local volunteers as well as Seward County volunteers when absolutely necessary.

This is one of the main assignments of the Program Coordinator for Jefferson County, Don Cook. He has plans of recruiting volunteers, training them, supporting the volunteers when they make court appearances and supporting the volunteers in any way possible. Presently he has set a goal of recruiting 15 volunteers for this program.

Both Robotham and Cook point out that independent research has demonstrated that children with a CASA volunteer are substantially less likely to spend time in long-term foster care and are more likely to do better in school. This is considered a very big positive for the court system as well as for the county budget and state budget, as well as the schools.

Cook says that he is hoping to be able to begin a training class as early as Janu-

ary. The initial training is 30 hours. This training includes breakout sessions where trainees will attend a court session so that they can start to understand the process that they are getting involved in. There are also monthly support group meetings where the volunteers can share concerns and ideas. Robotham and Cook also plan to attend all juvenile hearings with the volunteer to provide additional support.

Once a CASA volunteer has been certified, there are ongoing Continuing Education Credits that will be required but there are conferences and opportunities for further training provided through CASA. Once trained the volunteers are expected to spend between 5-7 hours a month with the youth you have been assigned as well attend any pertinent juvenile proceedings. CASA volunteers report directly to the judge so that he is able to make the best informed decision possible in the best interest of the child.

Cook has worked in the court system working with court ordered detained juveniles as well as serving as a volunteer probation officer. This helps him in the type of knowledge that the volunteers would need to know.

"I grew up through the foster care system," Cook said. "I remember that I was

scared to death as I grew up."

This knowledge will also help him give the volunteers a wider perspective of what the youth may be going through so that they can give the best assistance possible.

The CASA office is open Tuesday and Thursday from 8:30-12:30. They are located at the 901 F, inside the Baptist Church. They also have a new phone number (402) 587-0937. Cook said he would be glad to provide any additional information and can also be contacted through email at Don@SoutheastNebraskaCASA.org.

"We have the children," said Cook. "What we need is the volunteers. Our goal is to get the child to a safe permanent home and we can't do it without the volunteers. Jefferson County has need and I want to help fill it."