



State Representative Duane Stark House District 4

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Rep Stark Advocates for Court Appointed Special Advocates ***Southern Oregon Lawmaker Wants State Mandate Funded - CASA for Every Foster Child***

(Salem) [State Representative Duane Stark](#) (R-Josephine County) told the House Judiciary Committee in Salem this week that Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) have a unique role in Oregon's foster care system, "they know how to speak both legalize in court and they also know how to speak the love language of children." Representative Stark is spearheading [House Bill 2171](#) which seeks to ensure there are enough supervisors so that eventually each foster child in state custody can have a CASA assigned to their case. As a foster and adoptive parent Representative Stark has experienced life with and without CASAs appointed to his foster children.

According to the [Oregon CASA Network](#) (OCN), "CASAs provide a powerful voice in court for abused and neglected children." In fiscal year 2015-16 nearly 1,900 CASA volunteers supported around 5,000 children throughout Oregon. Yet another 6,500 foster children were not able to have a CASA assigned due to lack of resources statewide.

Under current Oregon Law, "in every case under [ORS chapter 419B](#), the court shall appoint a court appointed special advocate." The problem is not necessarily the number of people in the community willing to volunteer their time and energy. [National CASA certification standards](#) limit the number of volunteers based on the number of paid supervisors. It's approximately 30 volunteers per supervisor.

During his testimony to the Judiciary Committee, Representative Stark pointed out the state mandate is woefully underfunded right now. He explained HB 2171 is "intended to bring our funding levels for paid CASA supervisors up so we can actually complete the mandate we've been given."

Jennifer Mylenek, the Executive Director for CASA of [Jackson](#) and [Josephine](#) Counties, also spoke before the committee. "When there's a CASA assigned, there is another pair of eyes on those children," said Mylenek. "There's a volunteer who has dedicated their life to looking after this child for no pay."

According to Mylenek, on any given day in both counties combined there are an average of 700 children in foster care being served by 228 CASA volunteers with oversight by seven supervisors. In calendar year 2016 around 628 foster children were assigned a CASA but an estimated 500 were not served. In Josephine County, around 140 children were able to have a CASA volunteer by their side, however, another 250 went without.

Mylenek explained these highly trained volunteers are critical to helping these vulnerable children navigate the legal system. "We don't always agree with child welfare, but that's really the beauty of the CASA role, is that we are an independent lay voice with only that child's best interest at heart. We don't face any bureaucracy or red tape... but we are duly appointed by the court." She added 99% of foster children who have a CASA don't experience re-abuse.

Representative Stark began working on this issue a couple of years ago in his work as a community outreach pastor in Grants Pass, before he was elected to the legislature. In addition to serving on the House Judiciary Committee, Representative Stark is Co-Chair of the legislature's public safety budget committee and a member of the House Human Services Committee.

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