

Child-advocacy program draws wide support

By ROBIN MUSITELLI
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — A court-appointed advocate program for children was the belle of the bureaucracy Monday.

Representatives of more than a dozen agencies and organizations lined up to add their "yea" — not a single "nay" was heard — on plans to launch the the volunteer-based program in Santa Cruz County.

Implementation of the CASA — Court-Appointed Special Advocate — program is among 30 recommendations expected to be approved today by the county Board of Supervisors to reform the county's Children Protective Services.

On the eve of the hearing, Fred Keeley, chairman of the board, announced that \$5,000 in start-up funding for CASA has been promised by the Santa Cruz Community Foundation. Keeley predicted county funding would not even be needed, because more grant funding and donations are expected.

Keeley also headed the line-up of supporters, which included Superior Court Judge Tom Black, County Office of Education Superintendent Diane Siri, Human Resource Agency Director Will Lightbourne, and members of the Children's Commission, Juvenile Justice Commission and Santa Cruz County grand jury.

CASA uses court-appointed volunteers to follow children, particu-

The volunteers are trained to advocate the childrens' best interests, not the parents' or the systems'.

larly abused and neglected children, through the vast child-welfare system.

The volunteers are trained to advocate the childrens' best interests, not the parents' or the systems'. When attorneys for the parents advance their clients' interests in custody fights, for instance, the CASA volunteer's role would be to look out for the child's best interests.

"This person has a one-issue agenda — the child," Keeley said of the advocates.

The volunteers appear at court hearings, and make recommendations to the judge.

Sometimes, they are the only person involved in the system who is not paid to care for the child, said Sherry Sheard, a Ben Lomond foster parent. That alone makes a big difference to the child, she said.

The case that propelled CASA to the top of the "must have" list of fixes was the Ruby Pointer child-neglect case.

Pointer's three girls were taken into custody last summer, virtually feral, according to court records. Pointer has a history of mental illness and child abuse, including conviction of abuse involving Sheard's foster son, Michael. He is Pointer's son, who was taken from her on the point of starvation.

The CASA program wouldn't have made a difference to Pointer's girls, since advocates aren't assigned until the children are involved in the legal system, said Sheard.

CASA costs about \$500 annually for each child, according to Nora Manchester, executive director of the Santa Clara County CASA program. That program served about 450 children last year. Manchester said the program has proved cost-effective, shortening the time children are involved in the legal system and saving money in foster care, for instance.

In Santa Cruz County, some 250 children potentially could have volunteers, according to Bob Carroll, a member of the grand jury which has recommended CASA. Carroll was also instrumental in establishing the Santa Clara County program, and is now working to write guidelines for a program here.



Judge Tom Black was one of a host of officials backing the advocacy plan.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel