

~~BATTERED CHILDREN~~ Child Abuse

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# New program to look out for abused children

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More than a year after the Ruby Pointer child neglect case shocked Santa Cruz County, a long-awaited new program that watches out for the rights of abused children is raising hopes and looking for volunteers.

The Court Appointed Special Advocates of Santa Cruz County (CASA) opened a small office in September.

The non-profit group will train volunteers to follow the cases of abused children, become friends with them and protect their rights during court proceedings.

Part of a national network with chapters in 520 other counties, the concept has re-

ceived widespread acclaim. The San Jose CASA program was given a "Point of Light Award" two years ago by President Bush.

Santa Cruz director Ellen Fitzgerald said she hopes to have up to 60 volunteers trained and helping children by February. One of the first orientation meetings is tonight.

"We really have a chance to make a difference in a lot of children's lives," said Fitzgerald, a former San Jose child development specialist.

Volunteers will undergo 32 hours of training. Then they will be given access to the county records of a child who has been removed from a household by social workers because of abuse.

The volunteer — who is expected to spend 2.5 hours a week with a child — meets with the child's parents, foster parents, social workers and teachers.

"They also spend time just supporting the child emotionally — fun things, like trips to the ice cream store or the beach, things that maybe no one has done with the child before," Fitzgerald said.

The volunteer finally makes a recommendation to a judge about how the legal system should proceed.

Judges decide whether abused children in dependency cases will return to their parents or stay with foster parents, where they will live, how long and under what conditions.

Because social workers often are overburdened with dozens of cases a month, CASA volunteers offer special attention that abused children would not otherwise receive, supporters say.

Last year there were 263 families in Santa Cruz County whose children were removed by social workers because of abuse.

The Santa Cruz CASA program, which has a start-up budget of \$50,000, mostly in private donations, was organized last fall as part of a reform effort in the child welfare system.

In June 1991, the community was outraged when police responding to a noise

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complaint at Ruby Pointer's east-side townhouse found her three young daughters living in piles of garbage and unable to speak beyond grunts.

Afterward, county supervisors hired more social workers and reorganized the Child Protective Services agency. They also called for a CASA program.

"The Pointer case was really an affront to people," Fitzgerald said. "It generated action."

Today, Pointer remains in a maximum-security mental facility in the San Bernardino County desert. Her sister has adopted her eldest and youngest daughters,

ages 3 and 7. The middle daughter, who is 5, lives in a Santa Cruz foster home.

All are progressing well, sources say. They are talking, playing with friends and attending special-education classes in public schools.