

Pro Bono – Law Firms

Advocating Children's Best Interests

The Editor interviews **John Vanarthos**, Member, Norris McLaughlin & Marcus, P.A., and Board Member, CASA of Somerset, Hunterdon and Warren Counties (CASA of SHaW); and **Tracey L. Heisler**, Executive Director, CASA of SHaW.

Editor: What is CASA?

Heisler: The Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) was founded in 1977 by Judge David Soukup. Recognizing the impact of the life changing decisions he was making for abused and neglected children, he wanted more information about their perspectives.

Prior to CASA, the parents and authorities were represented in dependency proceedings, but the children were not. To help him make more informed decisions, he asked his friends to visit the children's homes, speak with them and gather as much information from other sources as possible.

Judge Soukup's success led other judges to replicate his model. Today, CASA organizations continue to spring up across the country to advocate the best interests of an ever growing number of abused and neglected children.

Editor: What is a CASA volunteer?

Heisler: An individual from the local community, a CASA volunteer is rigorously trained to become an advocate in the court system for abused and neglected children. In New Jersey, CASA volunteers represent only children who have been removed from their homes and are in either foster care or placement with a relative. Volunteers have to be at least 21 years, have a clean criminal history and have a desire to make a difference in the child's life.

In addition to the 30 hours of initial training to become an advocate, a CASA volunteer maintains at least 12 hours annually of in-service education. A CASA volunteer helps ensure that the best interest of the child is advocated for at every stage of the dependency process.

Vanarthos: Other volunteer opportunities abound as well. We welcome corporate sponsors who would like to contribute to their local community by recruiting their employees to serve as volunteers in such fundraising activities as a golf outing or 5-K run.

We also welcome volunteers to serve on CASA of SHaW's board of directors. Currently our directors have a wide range of professional backgrounds, and we'd like to have an increasingly broad minority and geographic representation.

In addition, we'd like to create a board of advisors to involve a number of high profile individuals within the community. While they may not have the time required to attend board of director meetings, they can contribute their skills and talents to any of a variety of special projects suited to their areas of interest.

Corporate counsel are excellent candidates for all these volunteer opportunities and more.



John Vanarthos

Editor: Why do we need CASA, and how does it differ from similar organizations?

Heisler: Among CASA's invaluable services, its volunteers visit the children regularly and help identify their needs and what services are available to meet the children's needs and make the court aware of them.

Once the court orders services for the child, the CASA volunteer interviews family members, physicians, teachers, therapists, foster parents, biological parents and anyone else who has contact with that child to monitor the progress.

The CASA volunteer also helps to find potential family placements that may not have been previously identified by the Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS). This can be an extremely valuable service. Placing a child with a family member can provide emotional stability, and the state saves money. If the parental rights are terminated, the CASA volunteer may still be able to find a way for parental contact with the child in a safe setting.

A CASA volunteer usually has only one child or family group assigned at a time. Other organizations do not have the flexibility to provide the same level of advocacy and care for the child.

While other organizations address one part of the services needed by the child, the CASA volunteers take a holistic view of the child developmentally, socially, educationally and emotionally.

Editor: How is CASA organized?

Heisler: Individual CASA programs are supported by the national and state-level CASA organizations that provide technical and financial support. In New Jersey, CASA is organized in 13 vicinages of which all but two have functioning CASA programs. Serving Somerset, Hunterdon and Warren Counties, CASA of SHaW is one of New Jersey's two tri-county vicinages.

Editor: What has CASA of NJ accomplished?

Heisler: Formed in August 1999 with a mandate to open CASA programs



Tracey L. Heisler

throughout the state, CASA of NJ has opened programs in all but two vicinages, which is a remarkable feat. The state office has done a tremendous job of educating the public and our legislative representatives about the importance of CASA programs.

Last year, CASA of NJ received \$750,000 in state appropriations. This year, we asked for \$950,000. An office with only four individuals, CASA of NJ did a wonderful job reporting on the excellent results achieved by CASA programs and the need for financial resources to serve more children. I'm delighted that legislature agreed with CASA of NJ's \$950,000 funding request.

Editor: What are CASA of SHaW's goals?

Heisler: Only a year old, CASA of SHaW has trained 14 volunteers, of which 10 are currently active, and has provided advocacy services for 24 children. Another class of volunteers is being trained this month with the goal of serving an additional 26 children by the end of the fiscal year.

Currently, I am CASA of SHaW's only full-time employee. The national standard permits a half-time supervisor to have only up to 15 volunteers. We are hiring another half-time supervisor to oversee the incoming class.

Another pressing goal is to find a permanent home. We currently borrow office space in Somerset County where our ability to expand is limited. We hope to locate an office in the Clinton area.

Editor: John, why did you decide to serve CASA?

Vanarthos: All about helping children in need, CASA is a great and worthwhile cause. I feel a need to give something back, and the work I am doing for CASA of SHaW helps me to make a meaningful contribution to our community and future generations. Serving a relatively new organization allows me to help build CASA of SHaW's foundation and infrastructure, which I find challenging and fulfilling.

Serving on CASA of SHaW's board is a great experience. As a corporate

attorney I have sat on boards and represented the interests of boards for many companies. Because most companies are for-profit businesses, the focus is on their growth and profitability. Serving CASA of SHaW, the focus is on helping as many children as possible. Our meetings are not just a get together of corporate types. We roll up our sleeves and identify what needs to be done. No one task is beneath or beyond us.

Editor: What do you personally bring to the organization?

Vanarthos: Coming from different backgrounds, professions and experiences, everyone on our board contributes a unique skill set and perspective. We all offer what we can to meet the great variety challenges facing CASA of SHaW. Our board's composition of individuals with such different experiences enhances our ability to solve any challenge.

My legal background and experience in the area of corporate and business law give me the ability to offer assistance and a focused perspective on some of the legal issues that the board faces. My experience in the business world representing many small businesses, as well as large cap companies, also allows me to offer real world practical perspectives. That ability is shared by all of our board members although in each case it varies depending on the member's education, training and exposures in for-profit businesses as well as volunteer organizations.

Having practiced corporate and business law in Somerset County for almost 20 years enhances my ability to help CASA of SHaW in other ways as well. I have developed an extensive network of professional and personal relationships with business people, judicial personnel, government employees and others.

My law firm Norris, McLaughlin & Marcus, P.A. is the largest law firm headquartered in Somerset County. As the administrative head of our corporate department, I can help inform friends of the firm about the needs and goals of CASA of SHaW. CASA of SHaW is still in the process of establishing itself in the community, and I am very happy to help it get as much exposure in the community as it can get.

Editor: How can corporations help?

Heisler: CASA receives some funding from the legislature, but the vast majority of the funds we have are from donations from the public. We are very grateful for the generosity of a number of corporations that have done a tremendous job in helping us advocate children's best interests. A golf outing recently hosted by Ethicon to benefit us was very successful. We have been the beneficiaries of Ortho McNeil, and we are one of three recipients of the proceeds from a 5-K run on September 10 sponsored by the Somerset County Bar Association. We are very appreciative of all their support and invite other corporations to join us in our efforts.

Please email the interviewees at jvanarthos@nmmlaw.com or casashaw@juno.com with questions about this interview.