

April 25, 2016

TO: Protect Montana Kids Commission

FROM: Dennis F. Molnar, Exec. Dir.

CASA of Lewis & Clark and Broadwater Counties

REF.: Written Comments to the Commission

I have worked with the Helena, Child and Family Services office here as a CASA and CASA Director since 2012. The experience has been both rewarding and frustrating in many aspects. Let me provide you with several examples.

ORIENTATION AND TRAINING:

We have had the workers, and supervisors in the Helena office come and talk to all of our training classes for new CASA's since at least 2012. Currently, we have the regional administrator for this area come and speak to our people during their orientation program. Our new CASA's get a clear understanding of what a worker does, their responsibilities, the format of case investigations, ongoing work with kids and families and the opportunity to ask questions. Unfortunately, it is my understanding that the CPS workers don't receive the same information during their orientation about who and what CASA is and does.

CASA's are required to maintain and get 12 hours of continuing education a year, related to what they do, children related topics, working with families, local service providers and/or read books or watch DVD's of relevant information. We encourage them to go to the Child Abuse and Neglect Conference each year and participate in the statewide CASA conference if one is being held. Unfortunately, most of the workers in Helena haven't participated in the Child abuse and neglect conference, that the department sponsors and there is no specific requirement that I am aware of that they need to get a specific number of training hours each year that is documented.

COMMUNICATIONS:

Communication between our organizations has not always been the greatest, but we are both working hard to increase the opportunities that we have and can make to sit down face to face and talk. CASA and the Helena supervisors meet monthly to talk about specific case issues, problems CPS staff have with CASA's and CASA's have with CPS staff. This is a people oriented process and it is hard to know what is the best way to communicate with some people; in person, by phone or email. This is a work in progress and building relationships with people is how you resolve and work out these differences. We have an annual fund raiser in Helena for CASA and this year for the first time we gave an award to the CPS worker that our CASA's nominated based on her working with them and her communication.

We also meet monthly with a DN work group; made up of representatives from the judges, county attnys., public defender's office, CPS and CASA. We have been able to sit down and talk through various issues and topics, come to resolutions and plan for possible new services like a drug court for DN families. The need for this has become evident to us all based on the number of cases we currently have with at least 70% of them having some form of addiction.

TRANSPARENCY:

This is one of those issues that comes up in various areas of working with the department. Perhaps the one area that it has been most evident in, is the selection of a permanent home for children being placed for adoption or guardianship. This has been a progressively changing format, where CASA's and attorneys for the child were not included in the process originally. It changed to where we were able to give feedback to the department, but not sit in the meetings and understand why and how they came to the decisions they did regarding permanent placement options. Without this clear understanding of the process, it often makes it difficult to be in agreement and we therefore need to petition the court for a hearing to review the decision and make a final decision regarding permanency. We have been told that the department staff are not always in agreement about the choice and this may be why we are not invited to sit in the meetings. This is a crucial part of any child's life, permanent placement and adoption. To hold a meeting for 30-60 minutes, read a home study and make this decision seems to be an inappropriate process. I have always had several questions after reading home studies and we don't as a group call the potential placement family and ask those questions.

INCONSISTENT POLICY APPLICATION:

This has come up more in the area of non-offending parents getting their children. Sometimes they are required to work a treatment plan, but CASA is not usually provided any information about their past history and why this is being required. On the other hand, some parents are given their children and CASA is not informed why or what this was based on and only find out when we receive a court order dismissing the case. We have no opportunity to review facts, gather information and make our recommendations to the court.

STAFF TURNOVER:

This is a major concern and how it affects the children and families the department works with. This is a difficult job being a CPS worker, it is natural to have secondary trauma, and burnout and turnover after several years can and should be expected. However, when workers tell you that they don't feel respected at their job, what they have to say is not always listened to, their opinions are not professionally accepted and you're told to do what you are told. There are many studies that show that professionals don't leave because of money, they leave because they are not treated with the respect and professionalism they want, require and need to do this kind of job. You can't hire someone and tell them they are professionals and then treat them like they are not. Teach them how to be independent functioning people, able to make good decisions, strong in their convictions and they will stay. It's not always about money! I know, I was one of those people.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Words are powerful and can be empowering as well. The term "Treatment Plan" is used by the department and members of the team to explain the tasks and areas that parents need to work on in order to successfully get their child back in their home. This is a medical and surgical term, not really directly related to the work we do with families and doesn't speak to the message that is put out to families. We stress "keeping families strong", "keeping families together", "reunification of families", but we then put a negative terminology in the process and use the wording of "treatment". Can we

look at renaming this process in a more positive way to engage families and empower them? Instead of call what they do and work on as "treatment plans", can we relabel them as "family reunification plans". This is what we are supposed to be working with them on and what our work is about.

Foster Care Review Committee at one time was the citizen review board and in the changing of this process to where the department has more responsibility and control, the committee has become less affective in their role. Paperwork is often not provided to the members in a timely fashion for meetings with updated information about children. Committee members are often not representative of the community at large and rather often only stakeholders. Verifying that judges get, review and are in agreement with the recommendations of the committee is often not verified in any way, yet federal guidelines require that these issues be addressed by the process. A judge's sign off sheet back to the department verifying receipt of the paperwork, review of the paperwork and agreement or questions the judge may have would be beneficial. The judge does have the opportunity to request a hearing should they have concerns about the information provided and or the recommendations.

Dennis F. Molnar, CASA Director, Helena