

Child advocates answer call

Agency's largest class sworn in via videoconferencing

By Elizabeth Zavala STAFF WRITER



Photos by Kin Man Hui / Staff photographer

Judge Peter Sakai swears in the new Child Advocates San Antonio volunteers via Zoom videoconferencing Friday from his courtroom. Sakai told the new class that “our community needs you more than ever.”

For the first time in his courtroom, Judge Peter Sakai on Friday used Zoom videoconferencing to swear in a new CASA volunteer class — the agency’s largest with 42 people.

The mission of Child Advocates San Antonio, formed 36 years ago, is to recruit, train and supervise court-appointed volunteers who advocate for abused and neglected children and youth who are in the temporary custody of the state due to the acts or negligence of their parents and caregivers.

CASA and court officials said they were “amazed” and “grateful” to the people who signed up just as the coronavirus pandemic began, and who stayed the course to become advocates for children.

“Judge Sakai, who is technically challenged, has now zoomed in,” he said laughing as he greeted Marina Gonzales, chief executive officer of CASA, and the 42 people who were waiting to take their oath. Sakai administered the oath via his laptop while sitting on the bench in a mostly empty courtroom.



Judge Sakai and Bexar County Sheriff's Deputy Margot Rendon wear masks as the judge prepares.

Before the oath, Sakai congratulated the recruits, CASA administration and staff for their efforts in providing “eyes and ears” to the courts by looking out for the interests of the children.

“I want you to know how honored I am to swear y’all in and welcome you aboard in this time of crisis. Our community needs you more than ever,” the judge said.

As he read the oath, the big monitors in Sakai’s courtroom showed the smiling faces of the recruits as they came up one-by-one as they repeated the judge words.

CASA advocates are fact-finders for the judges and give voice to the

children to which they are assigned. They carefully research the children’s backgrounds for the judges so that the courts can make sound decisions about their future, according to the agency.

For example, the courts depend on the advocate to “determine if it is in the best interest of the child to live with the parent(s) or legal guardian, remain in foster care, or be freed for permanent adoption,” according to the agency.



Kin Man Hui / Staff photographer

Judge Peter Sakai dons a mask as he walks along an empty hallway at the Bexar County Courthouse.

The advocates work closely with Child Protective Services but remain independent. CASA advocates will

make a recommendation about placement to the court, and then follow through until the case is permanently resolved, according to the agency.

They must commit to work with the agency for 12 months, visiting the child or children at least once a month. They must complete training and maintain confidentiality.

After the ceremony, Sakai said he was awestruck by the compassion and commitment the volunteers have shown, especially during the coronavirus outbreak. The Children's Court has continued its work, holding hearings remotely to keep up with cases.

Children's Court has held more than 500 hearings, with no resets or delays for children and families during the coronavirus quarantine, according to data provided by the county.

There are currently 3,040 children in the foster care system in Bexar County. That number has decreased through the years from a high of 3,500, officials said.

Gonzales, who has led CASA for three years, said the agency has 550 active advocates.

The agency holds about nine classes a year. Volunteers must commit to training three nights a week, for three weeks, for a total of 33 hours of training. She said they normally have about 30 people per class, but the April class, which began with 45 people, is the largest group she has seen during her tenure.

"We are thrilled to have 42 people today," Gonzales said. "This class has the potential to serve at least 84 kids, which is amazing. We are very grateful to add them to our CASA team."

Chris Poage, 47, of Helotes, said he had always wanted to be a volunteer, but something was always holding him back.

He signed up after he became aware of the program during a February church retreat.

"I made the decision to make serving a priority," he said Friday afternoon.

He and his wife, Wendy, raised two sons. They are grown and already out of the house; so he felt the time was right.

He said he learned through the training that 50 percent of homeless people spend their childhoods in the foster care system. That changed him.

"It has given me a different perspective and opened my heart more to people and their struggles," he said.

"I am a little nervous but excited to be looking out for a child or children and what's best for them."

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