

# PAWNEE NATION



## **Pawnee Tribal Court Appointed Special Advocate Program Pawnee, Oklahoma**

<b>Founded:</b>	1998
<b>Service area:</b>	approximately 900 acres in north central Oklahoma
<b>Population:</b>	tribal enrollment is approximately 2,500
<b>Source of funding:</b>	National CASA
<b>Contact:</b>	Helen Norris, Director Pawnee CASA Pawnee County Courthouse 500 Harrison Pawnee, OK 74058 918-762-3776 Fax: 918-762-2498

## **Program Description**

The Pawnee Tribal Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Program (Pawnee CASA) is a satellite program of the Tulsa County, Oklahoma, CASA program (Tulsa CASA, Inc.), and it serves children in both the Pawnee Tribal Courts and the Pawnee County state courts. The jurisdictional challenges for cases involving abused and neglected tribal children in Oklahoma have required a creative approach to providing advocates for these children. Due to the unique approach of Pawnee CASA, when a case is transferred from state to tribal court, or if the child is on the reservation but involved in a state court proceeding, the Pawnee CASA volunteer follows the child. Although judges, district attorneys, and social service providers may change, the CASA volunteer remains the one constant in the child's life and follows the case whether it is in state or tribal court.

In general, CASA advocates or volunteers are lay people who are assigned by judges to represent the best interests of the child before the court. The volunteers play a crucial role, acting as the eyes and ears of the judge by gathering

information about the child and family. Pawnee CASA fulfills this role superbly and its volunteers have become a valuable asset to the court proceedings. Both state and tribal judges have indicated that they truly rely upon the Pawnee CASA reports to ensure that accurate information will inform the court about the family situation and the needs of the child.

## **Volunteers: The Heart of CASA**

Pawnee CASA's success in representing the Pawnee children is primarily due to its hard-working and dedicated volunteers. As with all CASA programs, the advocates are trained volunteers who give their valuable time and hearts to the children. With a paid staff of one full-time and one part-time person, Pawnee CASA relies heavily on its invaluable volunteers, and currently has about 20 Indian and non-Indian volunteers. Pawnee CASA is also developing innovative partnerships among its volunteers, including having "husband and wife" teams and pairing a Pawnee elder with a younger CASA volunteer to provide more comprehensive

cultural information for the court. Pawnee CASA makes sure its volunteers are well-prepared to serve the children and the state and tribal courts. The volunteer training includes more than how to speak up for a child—it recognizes that the best volunteer is familiar with both state and tribal court systems. It includes training on courtroom procedures in state and tribal court, social services, juvenile court, cultural issues, advocacy, and how to testify in court. After volunteers complete the intense training, they are sworn in as officers of both tribal and state courts. Recently, in recognition of exemplary efforts, a Pawnee CASA husband and wife team received the Oklahoma CASA of the Year award.

Pawnee CASA Director Helen Norris is active in outreach and education in the community to encourage awareness of child abuse issues and seek new volunteers. She has been innovative in her approach to make CASA a visible service in the community by sponsoring booths at local fairs, providing CASA fans for use at powwows, and placing CASA posters throughout the community. Pawnee CASA has also advertised in the tribal newsletter and compiled materials to ensure that state and tribal courts are aware of its presence. The local newspaper was present to cover the swearing in of new CASA volunteers.

## Customizing the CASA Model

Pawnee CASA has served as a model program for other new tribal CASA programs across the Nation, and Norris has made important contributions to customizing National CASA resources for tribal use. She is currently serving on the National CASA curriculum development committee, which prepared core materials for training CASA volunteers nationally. Norris has customized the National CASA materials to provide a culturally relevant training for the Pawnee CASA volunteers. For example, Norris adapted the training materials that called for group discussions to allow more individualized participation. This change made the materials more appropriate for Pawnee culture because

traditional Pawnee women do not often speak openly in large group settings. Norris has shared her experiences with curriculum developers to ensure that mandatory materials are adaptable to tribal situations. The tribal adaptations enable recruitment and retention of volunteers because the materials are provided in a manner respectful of each tribe's unique ways.

The primary goal of the Pawnee CASA is to provide a CASA volunteer for every Native American child in state and tribal court in Pawnee County. The program has developed a unique approach to the jurisdictional problems by coordinating the county and tribal CASA programs to work together. As the Pawnee CASA intensively reaches out to recruit volunteers, provide well-rounded training, and maintain dedicated staff and volunteers, there is no doubt that in the very near future every Native child in Pawnee County will have a CASA volunteer to represent the child's physical, emotional, and cultural needs in the judicial system.

## Keys to Success

- ◆ Develop cultural approaches to recruitment, training, and retention of volunteers.
- ◆ Promote cooperation between state and tribal courts.
- ◆ Look for and access resources from any local or national sources involved with protection and advocacy for children.
- ◆ Access support and training from the National CASA Association.

## Quotes

*Our tribal council recognized the need and backed us 100 percent.*

—Helen Norris  
Director  
Pawnee Tribal Court Appointed  
Special Advocate Program

*The most rewarding part about this is knowing that our Indian children have Indian CASAs who are*

*trained and who speak for them. Our children  
deserve the best, and they're getting the best.*

*—Helen Norris  
Director  
Pawnee Tribal Court Appointed  
Special Advocate Program*

*National CASA is wonderful about  
supporting tribes. Their help has been  
amazing.*

*—Helen Norris  
Director  
Pawnee Tribal Court Appointed  
Special Advocate Program*