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Wednesday, August 22, 2007

NEIGHBORHOODS

Community Groups

In wake of budget cuts, CASA plans party

County government is cutting their funds.

By SCOTT DAUGHERTY, Staff Writer

Published August 21, 2007

More and more children need their help every year.

But to reaffirm their dedication to the community — and hopefully earn \$40,000 to bolster their budget — the county's Court Appointed Special Advocate program plans to throw a black tie gala this October.

"I can't imagine CASA not being here. It's such a scary thought," said Executive Director Rebecca Julian, explaining her volunteers helps guide about 260 county foster children through the often-complicated judicial system. "It's priceless."

The \$125-a-plate gala — entitled "An Evening in CASAblanca" — is scheduled for Oct. 13 at the new Westin Annapolis. It will feature a Casablanca theme — the ballroom will be decorated as Rick's Cafe — and will include a live auction of a dress worn by Ingrid Bergman.



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The event, which will celebrate the program's 10th anniversary, is drawing VIPs from across the state. Former governor Robert L. Ehrlich Jr., and his wife, Kendel, are expected to attend with Mrs. Ehrlich serving as the event's honorary chairman. Gen. Michael W. Hagee, a former commandant of the Marine Corps, and Adm. Charles R. Larson, a former superintendent of the Naval Academy, are also expected to attend.

"It's such a testament to the strong work we do," Ms. Julian said.

CASA, a private nonprofit organization, is part of a network of 900 child advocacy programs in the United States that recruits, trains and supervises volunteers to serve as advocates for abused and neglected children. A CASA volunteer, who has completed an extensive 35-hour training program, is assigned to one child or family and works with the Department of Social Services, the parents and the child's court appointed attorney to determine what is in the "best interest of the child."

"There were a lot of kids getting lost in the cracks," she said, noting that social workers and attorneys can each have dozens of case files to handle. "They don't have the time to devote an extensive amount of time to each child."

CASA is currently struggling to make up \$10,000 that County Executive John R. Leopold cut from their funding this year. Ms. Julian noted the group hired a new part-time staffer in May just weeks before learning the county was also cutting its \$40,000 grant.

"It was a double hit for us," she said.

But Ms. Julian said the cut has led them to simply redouble their fundraising efforts.

"It's really just brought the focus back (to fundraising)," she said, adding that they know government money won't always be there. "Even though we've taken a hit, we can bounce back. ... We don't rely on one piece of the pie to sustain our operations."

The county initially tried to cut CASA's funding from \$40,000 last fiscal year to \$5,000 this year. A letter writing campaign and testimony to the County Council led the county to give CASA \$30,000 for this fiscal year.

"We are thankful and grateful our funds were restored," she said.

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CASA also will receive more than \$98,000 from the state this fiscal year, leaving about \$167,000 the group must raise for itself in 2008 with private fundraising and grants.

“Everyone is fully aware of the number we need to make and they are committed,” she said.

Until now, most of CASA’s private money came from other groups throwing fundraisers. South River Colony sponsors an annual 5K fun run and walk every fall — Oct. 7 this year. BankAnnapolis sponsors an annual “Tee Up For a Child” golf tournament every May and the Eastport Yacht Club sponsors the Chesapeake Bay Women’s Challenge every July. CASA also holds a silent auction at the Anne Arundel County Bar Association’s Barristers Ball every April and is looking for a sponsor for their fourth Annual Voices of Children Breakfast on Nov. 2.

The gala is the group’s first foray into fundraising on its own. Ms. Julian hopes the party will become a signature event that will help them raise awareness, recruit more volunteers and let them celebrate.

“We want galas from here on out,” she said.

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