

## **Open Work Session**

### **Presentation of Lower Shore Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) Program**

**January 17, 2023**

Ms. Jerrona Smith, Regional Director of Lower Shore CASA, and Jamie Manning, Executive Director of Life Crisis, came before Council.

Ms. Smith said CASA is exactly what it says it is. She explained, the judges appoint every day citizens to serve as advocates on behalf of abused and neglected children. She said initially Lower Shore CASA served in Worcester County, and a long time ago she believes there was also a program in Wicomico County, but she thinks something happened with the funding, so that program was no longer to be. She said maybe about three years ago they started working to bring the program back to Wicomico County with a really huge push from Judge Sarbanes, who really wanted to bring Lower Shore CASA back to Wicomico. She said, not only did they expand to serve Wicomico, they also expanded to serve Somerset, so now they are like a tri-county program.

Ms. Smith said she wants to talk a little about what their volunteers do on a daily basis and provide some insight she has had from the program. She said she also wants to talk about some of the children who come through the program. She said she used to work for Head Start with Shore Up several years ago, and a lot of these kids come through that program starting at 3 years old moving up, and she thinks it is a really sad day when they were in the Head Start program and they noticed there were issues with the family then, but some of these same kids that she was a family service worker for or case manager for at Head Start she has seen come across her desk now as teenagers coming through the system. She said they also have criminal cases.

Ms. Smith said there is such a huge issue with their youth, especially here in Wicomico County, and they are trying their best to boost up their volunteer numbers, but they would really appreciate some backing from the Council to help them get the program out there. She said they need people to come in. She said of course they do a background check and things like that, but they really need some people. She said the people do not need to have a white collar job, they can have a blue collar job, they just need somebody who is willing to come in. She said there is a disparity that exists between males of color who come into the system more so than any other race and having volunteers to match that. She said for the longest period they had one male of color serve as a volunteer in their program and they used him as much as they could because some of the parents would request it. She said they requested men of color because there are none in the homes, and some of these young men do not know what that looks like or feels like to have someone that invested in them to actually go to their schools, meet with them, take them to the park, take them bowling, and invest some time in them so that, when it is time for them to go to court, they can actually advocate for their best interests based off of what they know about that child. Ms. Smith said they work at the discretion of the judge, and the judge relies on them for that bit of information, so they are the judge's eyes and ears outside of that courtroom. She said of course DSS is there and they do their part, as well as CPS, so there are other agencies that do their job, but one thing the courts did not want was another professional to serve these children, they just want an everyday person to be able to advocate in the courts on behalf of that child's best interests, and that is what they do as a CASA program.

Ms. Manning said they were super excited to take on Lower Shore CASA and expand it into Somerset and Wicomico Counties as well as continuing to maintain Worcester County. She then thanked the Council for recognizing National Human Trafficking Awareness Month. She said Life Crisis recently brought on a regional navigator for human trafficking to serve Wicomico and the surrounding counties. She said the children that CASA is serving are some of the most vulnerable, susceptible victims to human trafficking. She said they are foster children and children who are being abused and neglected every day. She said having CASA can help minimize that and can help nip it early before it becomes a bigger problem.

Ms. Manning said right now they are funded by the Administrative Office of the Courts, and they do receive a significant amount of funding for that, but it does not even cover all of the salaries for her staff. She said Life Crisis is fully funded by grants and fundraisers, so that is what they rely on. She explained, they do not bill victims for services, they do not bill insurance, or any of that. She said they do require a match for that grant they receive, which is at least \$145,000, and they attempt other avenues of funding. She said they are exploratory with all of that, but they do need that funding and would hope the Council would possibly consider them in their budget in the future for that.

Ms. Manning said they have been very successful in the six months since they brought this program to Wicomico County. She said they recruited over 20-some new volunteers, but the courts are steady assigning cases. She said kids enter foster care every day around the world. She said right now they currently have approximately 53 CASA cases and 63 advocates, so they are doing well, but that number climbs every day in the tri-county area. She said they appreciate the Council's support in spreading the word.

Ms. Smith said they have brochures about the program, to which Mr. Cannon responded, they can leave them on the table and that way anyone in the audience can pick one up as well.

Mr. Hastings said he was a part of the steering committee to help bring this to Wicomico County, and it was a very long, thoughtful process. He said they worked with the court system and a lot of community leaders across the Lower Shore in general, so this is a really great thing for Wicomico and Somerset. He then asked if they are still looking for volunteers, to which Ms. Manning responded, every day they are looking for volunteers. She said they have their training and they have gotten creative with it and offer virtual options now, but kids can enter care at any point up until 18, and then they can sometimes stay a little bit longer with the system. She said they need volunteers constantly, and they want a diverse group of volunteers as not everyone looks the same. She said blonde haired, blue-eyed little boys are not what enter foster care every day, they have all age ranges, all races, and all religions, so people with a lot of different backgrounds, and that is what they need. She said they need everyone.

Mr. Hastings asked what the best way is for folks to get a hold of them, to which Ms. Smith responded, they can be reached through their website, which is [lowershorecasa.org](http://lowershorecasa.org) and their phone number is 443-782-3585.

Ms. Smith said she would like to piggyback off what Ms. Manning said. She said, even though they have recruited a great number of volunteers, 95 percent of those volunteers have already been assigned to cases, and most of those cases are right here in Wicomico County.

Mr. Winn said he has an option and thought. He said he goes to church every Sunday and there are a lot of great churches in this community, like Emanuel Wesleyan or Oak Ridge Baptist, or he is sure Ms. Shields has a few churches she could think of, but the church community absolutely should be a part of this program. He said it is the same with Big Brothers Big Sisters, and he is sure they are aware of them. He said he is sure the Council is going to help out, but the only thing he can say is to definitely bring it to the attention of some of these local leaders, these pastors like Mark Bunting and Brian Moss and others. He said they have open hearts and they want to build the community up, that is why they have these churches, and this could be a way that they can give back to the community. Ms. Manning said that would be wonderful. She said they would love to go to any of the churches and speak and spread the word out there and hopefully recruit some people, to which Mr. Winn responded, they very well might because there are a lot of people in those churches who want to volunteer.

Ms. Shields asked if the children they are advocating for are already in the court system, to which Ms. Manning responded, they have already been adjudicated CINA, which is children in need of assistance, and they might be involved with in-home services, but the majority are in the foster care system. Ms. Shields asked how they handle the parents, or the mothers more likely, and do they bring a holistic approach, or are they just dealing with the children, to which Ms. Smith responded, primarily they deal with the children, but in order to speak to that child's best interest, they have to get to know the collaterals. She said they want to know who has the biggest influence in the child's life, so that means speaking with parents, teachers, or guardians, so they do get to know that family, but their primary job is to advocate for that child's best interest.

Ms. Shields explained, the reason she said that, and she goes to Wesley Temple, but they had an organization called Mothers for Equal Justice where they learn the justice system and meet different law enforcement agencies. She said she thinks the mothers at that time were a different generation than what is coming up as this was ten to twenty years ago, but she thinks they need to find a way to help the mothers because what happens with the mothers is they have to wait until their children get in trouble before they can actually get help. She said they may cry for help before the child gets to that point, but they say they have to have them in the juvenile system, and it is still going on today. She said, if they can somehow change the legislation, she knows when she went to the MACO Conference this past week, they had something in Anne Arundel County called Fresh Start that helps kids with preventative measures before they get to the point of getting into the justice system. She said there should be some way they look into that. She said, when she gets back she will be calling them.

Ms. Manning responded, at Life Crisis they touch on a variety of different areas and one of the areas where they assist with that and is why it came in line for them to take on this program is that they provide counseling for the nonoffending parents or caregivers or the children who are abused or neglected who go through the Child Advocacy Centers in all three counties. She said she has a therapist housed at each of those locations so the children can get immediate trauma therapy as well as they have therapists housed at their main location here in Wicomico County to help women, children, and victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse, and human trafficking, so she feels like they kind of work as an umbrella. She said this is one of their programs, they have the counseling program, and they have the safe house if they need to help those victims have a place to come to, and they are totally interested in partnering and coming up with new programs and ideas on how they can alter the course a little bit for these children and help them be successful individuals.

Mr. Cannon thanked them and said these are two great organizations for Wicomico County. He said the Council appreciates being able to help them create awareness, and they look forward to working with them in the future.

There was no further discussion.



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John T. Cannon, President, At-Large



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Shane Baker, Vice President, District 3



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James Winn, At-Large



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Shanie P. Shields, District 1



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Jeff Merritt, District 2



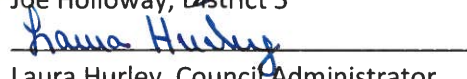
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Josh Hastings, District 4



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Joe Holloway, District 5



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Laura Hurley, Council Administrator