



**DISTRICT ATTORNEY
LARRY D. MORSE II**

550 W. Main Street
Merced, CA 95340
Phone (209) 385-7381
Fax (209) 725-3669

Chief Deputy District Attorney
HAROLD L. NUTT

Chief Deputy District Attorney
ROBERT O. CARROLL

Director of Administrative Services
JEANNETTE M. PACHECO

INVESTIGATIONS

(209) 385-7383

Chief Investigator
PATRICK N. LUNNEY

VICTIM WITNESS

(209) 385-7385

Victim Witness Program Director
LISA DeSANTIS

LOS BANOS DIVISION

445 I Street
Los Banos, CA 93635
Phone (209) 710-6070
Fax (209) 827-2029

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

January 10, 2017

For More Information Contact:
Amanda McCoy (209) 628-1646

DISTRICT ATTORNEY ANNOUNCES VICTIM SERVICES GRANT

The Merced County District Attorney's Office has been selected to receive \$373,000 through the federal Victims of Crime Act to expand their victim services programs through a partnership with the Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) program, District Attorney Larry D. Morse II announced today.

CASA is an organization comprised of highly trained and dedicated adult volunteers who advocate for the best interest of children in the foster care system. The grant will enable the DA's office to hire a victim witness advocate who will work with the CASA program and provide resources for CASA to recruit and train more advocates.

"CASA volunteers and I believe we have a moral obligation to change the life path for these children who, through no fault of their own, often find themselves adrift and rudderless when they most need help and guidance. The advocacy provided by CASA volunteers can literally save foster kids from becoming sad statistics in our community," Morse said.

For an abused or neglected child, a CASA volunteer is someone who listens to and fights for that child, by reaching out to teachers, social workers, mental health professionals, parents, lawyers, caregivers and anyone else who can address that child's needs, Morse said. "The CASA volunteer is someone whose sole mission is to help a foster child find a way out of the complex, overburdened child welfare system and into a safe, permanent home," he added.

"Hundreds of kids pass through the Merced County Foster Care system each year," said Shar Herrera, Executive Director of CASA and co-author of the grant. "These children are removed from their homes and placed in unfamiliar environments through no fault of their own. Many of them live in a state of constant crisis and, understandably, feel very much alone – until they find their Court Appointed Special Advocate," she said.

Herrera said CASA currently has 82 advocates serving 110 foster children. "While we cherish each of our volunteers, there is so much more that needs to be done. There are more than 550 children in foster care and our goal is to have a CASA advocate for each and every one of them," she said.

Morse said the foster system is “inextricably tied” to public safety. Nearly half of our foster children have chronic medical problems and many have serious emotional issues. Close to half of all children in the foster system never graduate from high school. An alarming number of these children will become homeless within 18 months of exiting foster care and almost half of the children in foster care will become incarcerated, he added.

“Statistics have long shown that foster kids and high school dropouts are the two most consistent categories of individuals who end up in jails and state prisons,” Morse said. “Unfortunately, fewer than 15% of the children in the foster care system receive the type of services and support that can be delivered to them through CASA and the District Attorney’s Victim Witness Assistance Program, he added.

CASA volunteers must complete 30 hours of training and 10 hours of court observation before being sworn in as an Officer of the Court. They are trained to advocate for foster children in the courtroom, classroom, and community. Each CASA volunteer is matched with a child and a volunteer Peer Coordinator who guides them as they work with a child. The CASA volunteer visits with the child on a regular basis and provides information to the Court. CASA volunteer spends an average of 8-10 hours a month on their foster children’s cases.

Morse encouraged those interested in helping create a brighter future for a foster child to contact CASA of Merced County today at (209) 722-2272 or Mercedcasa.org.

“It’s hard to imagine a more important contribution any volunteer can make than to be the lifeline for a vulnerable child caught in a system they can’t escape without help. CASA volunteers truly change lives,” Morse said.