

WINNER

## Voices For Children

BY ROBYN DEXTER



**T**ODAY, THERE ARE MORE THAN 1,500 St. Louis children in foster care. These children often don't have someone to be a voice for them—and that is where Voices for Children comes in. This organization, through the help of numerous dedicated volunteers, is able to help represent more than a third of local foster children and look out for their best interests.

Senior program director Ashley Beumer says Voices For Children got its start in St. Louis as part of the National Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Association, which started in Seattle. "There was a judge who decided that he was making decisions about children's lives without enough information about what was truly happening to them," Beumer says. "He said he could sleep at night when he heard a multi-million-dollar bankruptcy case, but couldn't when he heard the case of a child, because he felt like there wasn't anybody in the courtroom who was just speaking up for the kids."

That's how CASA as a movement got its start, and the St. Louis agency, which represents children both in St. Louis County and St. Louis City, is an accredited member of the national

association. "We are the only agency in the St. Louis area whose sole mission is to advocate for abused and neglected children in foster care by representing their best interests both in the courtroom and in the community," Beumer says. "Once a child enters foster care, many of their major life decisions are being made in a courtroom, and any other decisions are being made in community settings like their school or residential facility."

An attorney is hired to represent the child's best interests, and Voices pairs that attorney with a community volunteer to make sure the child's voice is truly heard. When all major decisions are being made, the child's best interests, regardless of budget or any other factor, take top priority. Voices teams of child advocates, made up of CASA volunteers, social work professionals and child advocacy attorneys, work on behalf of each child to ensure health and educational services.

"The work that we do has the impact of creating healthy and thriving children in foster care, which, in turn, creates healthy and thriving families," Beumer says. "We have a true opportunity to break the cycle of abuse."

Voices serves children and youth of all ages, from infants born drug-exposed to 21-year-olds.

No matter their age, all children have been victims of abuse and neglect, including physical abuse, sexual abuse, serious medical neglect and physical neglect. Despite these factors, Voices for Children volunteers and representatives know that these factors don't define the children's futures and their abilities to make the world a better place.

Voices has six objectives for the next few years, including serving a broader base, deepening the impact of legal and social advocacy, building its volunteer base, increasing efforts to affect systemic change, increasing community engagement, and developing resources and infrastructure to advance the organization's goals.

"We want to see that the children in foster care are safe, achieve permanency, and all of their needs for well-being are being met," Beumer says. "This is an opportunity to impact the entire St. Louis community, as well as the individual life of a child."

In the future, Beumer hopes the organization can continue to grow, recruit and train more community advocates so they can serve even more children. "Our goal is to both broaden and deepen the representation we're able to give to children," she says. "We want to be able to meet all of their needs in a comprehensive way."

PHOTOS BY MARC CARTER