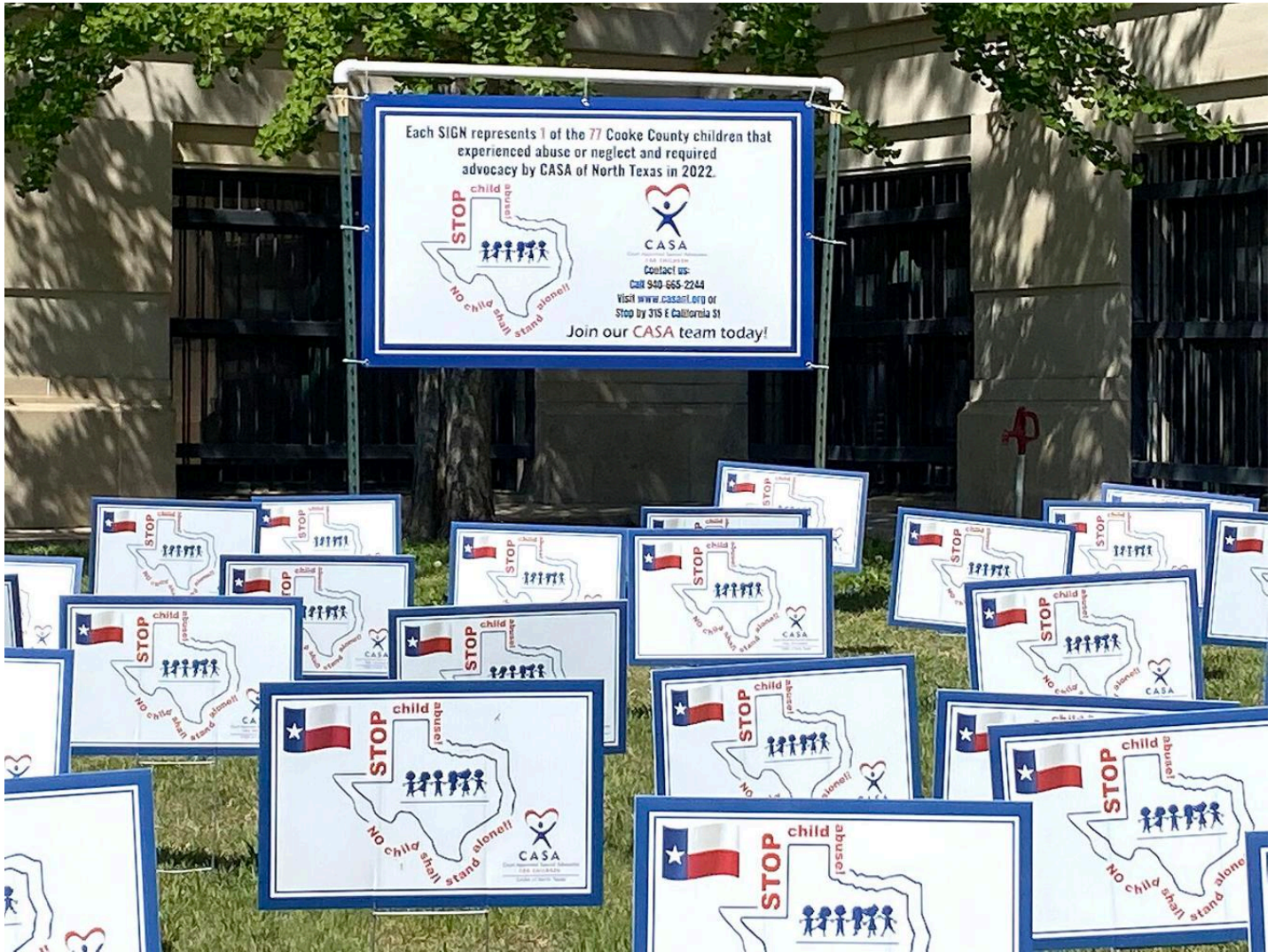


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FEATURED

## CASA, Abigail's team up to protect the vulnerable

IZZY AVEDESIAN Special to the Register  
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MIKE EADS/GDR

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Advocates for abused children want North Texas to be blue in April.

Court-Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) is selling blue T-shirts – showing a shoe with the tagline, “step-up to end child abuse” – for the Cooke County community to wear on Fridays in honor of April being National Child Abuse Awareness Month.

“We want to blue-out Cooke County every Friday of April,” said Dora Erwin, executive director of CASA North Texas.

Cooke County Child Protective investigations recorded 116 victims of child abuse and neglect in 2023, while in the state, 58,120 children suffered abuse and neglect.

“You’re dealing with a lot of stuff that’s packed away in this child and you’ve got to try to help them learn how to cope, how to deal with that, how to look forward, how to have hope again, how to have promise,” Erwin said.

To heighten awareness, the Cooke County Commissioners Court declared April as Child Abuse Prevention and Awareness Month.

CASA recruits and trains adult volunteers who become the “guardian ad litem” for children after they’ve been removed from their abusive home.

“A lot of times, we are the one constant that remains in that child’s life,” Erwin said.

While children are likely to face changes with case managers and attorneys throughout the legal process, their CASA advocate remains with them from the time they are removed from the home until the time that they are found a permanent residency.

“We interview with the child, we interview with the parents, we interview with the foster placements, we talk with CPS, we do a whole balance load,” Erwin said. “If they’re old enough then we visit with the school system where they’re enrolled, we visit with any kind of doctors, counselors, therapists, we kind of just keep a total overview of the child,” she said.

While CASA supports family reunification, it's not always a feasible option for permanent residency.

"Sometimes it involves various different foster cares, sometimes it's adoption, every case presents different obstacles and opportunities, so we don't really know exactly what it's going to look like for that child," Erwin said.

Cooke County court-appointed advocates often go above and beyond for the children placed with them, according to Erwin.

"We've got some kiddos – they have something exciting at school and the first thing they do is call their advocate, because they have that bond," she said.

Advocates cover all of the children assigned to Cooke County courts. Erwin said that CASA North Texas served 58 children last year with 30 volunteers.

Knowing how to care for a traumatized child "is something that comes from within that volunteer," Erwin said. "It's hard to teach. It's something that comes from the gut."

While CASA advocates for children removed from homes where the courts have become involved, Abigail's Arms Cooke County Family Crisis Center works with families affected by domestic violence or other problems.

Abigail's Arms started 40 years ago as a hotline for victims of sexual assault. It later expanded to help as calls about domestic violence became more frequent. It runs 24 hours per day now.

"Anytime one person hurts another person, they qualify for services with us," said Ginger Johnson, executive director of Abigail's Arms.

In addition to the shelter, the organization offers services for victims of sexual assault and domestic violence, including the child advocacy center.

The center allows for hands-on care with children who have experienced abuse or neglect. A multidisciplinary team, including advocates, nurses, therapists and Department of Family Protective Services, share assessments of the support a given child needs.

“We’re looking at what’s the best option to help this child move from being a victim of violence into being able to lead a healthy, happy life and move forward becoming a healthy, happy adult,” Johnson said.

All services provided by Abigail’s Arms are free. “It’s well-known that counseling is a huge help, especially trauma-informed counseling that specifically targets the victimization that occurs and moving past it,” Johnson said.

CASA North Texas and Abigail’s Arms are largely donation- based as well as being funded by state and federal grants.

To help spread awareness for April and in addition to the blue T-shirts, CASA is also hosting a free family movie night on Wednesday, April 24, at D-Max Cinema, where they’ll be showing the movie Ordinary Angels, a touching family movie. Tickets will be available on a first-come first-serve basis on the day of the showing.

Learn more at <https://www.casant.org/> and <https://abigailsarms.org/>.

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