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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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CASA Volunteers Could Play A Role in Preventing Local Child Deaths

April 29, 2021 ~ Cleveland, OH: April is national Child Abuse Prevention Month, and Child and Family Advocates of Cuyahoga County (CFACC) wishes to express our deep sorrow and concern regarding the recent deaths of two vulnerable children in our community as relayed by cleveland.com. We can only imagine what both 6-year old Kaamir Bright and 17-year old Hershawna Rias may have experienced in their difficult childhood journeys which ended too soon in tragic gun violence. Despite the wide variety of family intervention and support services available to both parents and children in Cuyahoga County, they simply weren't enough to protect these children. That has to change.

CFACC offers something that may have made a difference in these challenging child welfare cases- the CASA program. CASA stands for Court Appointed Special Advocate, a special kind of trained volunteer who advocates for the best interests of vulnerable children, both in juvenile court and in the community. CASAs are caring adults from all walks of life that serve children at risk for abuse, neglect and dependency. CASA is a nationally known and proven model of child advocacy, bringing an additional committed adult into the lives of children in the foster care and child welfare systems. CASA volunteers visit children regularly at home, at school, in foster homes, and in residential care settings. They take time to get to know the child(ren), examine medical and school records, recommend community-based resources, and otherwise learn about and monitor difficulties and risks the child(ren) may be facing. Considering what they have observed, they then attend scheduled juvenile court hearings and make recommendations about what may be in a child's best interests.

Aparna Pillay, Strategy Partner for the Cleveland Clinic and an active CASA volunteer and CASA board member in Cleveland, describes the impact of CASA this way: "The CASA program offers consistent support and advocacy for child victims within the welfare system during a time in their lives where they are waiting for some element of permanency. As an advocate, you have the opportunity to truly make an impact on a child's life and help break the cycle of abuse and neglect. The CASA program is invaluable for both the volunteers and the children served."

CASA volunteers must be 21 years of age, pass a background check, and complete thirty hours of training in child welfare, domestic violence, substance abuse, mental health, cultural competency and numerous other topics designed to help them be effective advocates for children. Since 2016, CFACC has trained more than 100 CASA volunteers and impacted the lives of over 550 local kids, both those in foster care like Hershawna, and those still at home with their parents, like Kaamir.

While there is no guarantee that having a CASA volunteer assigned to either Kaamir's or Hershawna's cases would have prevented their deaths, a CASA volunteer would have provided another layer of intervention and protection for both of these children, perhaps altering the outcome. CFACC therefore urges child-welfare providers in Cuyahoga County to make further use of CASA volunteers and take steps to ensure that more local children at risk for violence can be impacted by this vital but underused resource.

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Child and Family Advocates of Cuyahoga County is a non-profit 501(c)(3) charitable organization.

Mission: To make a difference for every child served through advocacy, education, and collaborative alliances.

Vision: Every child is seen, heard, and engaged, leading to permanency and hope.