

## **2026 Ohio CASA Celebrate Kids! Conference Workshop Descriptions**

### **Wednesday Plenary Session: Cultural Humility, Models and Competence**

Eileen P. Anderson, EdD, *Anne Templeton Zimmerman, MD Professor of Bioethics; Executive Director, Cultural Solutions, LLC, Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine*

Everyone has layers of culture. This workshop will teach us (a) how to identify aspects of our own cultural backgrounds that impact our decision-making; (b) how to work productively with experiences that are different from our own; and (c) review beliefs and practices important to common cultural groups in Ohio. We will learn how to use Cultural Models Tools and examine issues common to cultures of urban and rural poverty and youth cultures in addition to ethnic, religious, and other social groups. Finally, we will examine cases that help us understand when differences are allowable and when intervention is indicated.

### **Wed01: The Three Rs: Recruitment, Retention, and Recognition of Volunteer Management**

Beth Cardina, LSW, *Program Director, CASA/GAL Program of Summit County & Sarah Harvan, MA, BA, Training Coordinator, CASA/GAL Program of Summit County*

In this session specially designed for CASA staff members, attendees will learn the “3 Rs” are not isolated tasks, but part of a continuous cycle. A well-recognized volunteer is more likely to remain with the program (Retention) and, in turn, recommend the program to others (Recruitment). Join us for a practical session on building and launching a targeted recruitment campaign to expand your CASA/GAL volunteer network. You’ll gain firsthand insights from the Summit County ‘Men of CASA’ panel—including committee members, community ambassadors, and two volunteer board members. We will also explore effective strategies for year-round volunteer recognition to ensure a consistently supportive and engaging environment.

### **Wed02: Understanding Polyvictimization**

Lisa DeGeeter, JD, CA, RASS, *Senior Director of Policy and Prevention, Ohio Domestic Violence Network*

Polyvictimization, multiple instances of different types of victimization, is a common concept in the child welfare field, though the term may be unfamiliar to some. This workshop will define polyvictimization and examine its relationship to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Participants will explore the prevalence of polyvictimization as well as associated risk factors. By the end of the session, participants will have a deeper understanding of how polyvictimization intersects with child abuse, juvenile delinquency, and domestic violence. The workshop will also provide practical strategies for supporting child and adult survivors with complex trauma histories.

**Wed03: Working with Immigrant Children and Families in Ohio's Child Welfare System**

Jessica A. Ramos, Esq., *Manager, Immigration Team & Senior Attorney, Legal Aid Society of Southwest Ohio, LLC*

As Ohio's immigrant population continues to grow and more immigrant families come into contact with Ohio's child welfare system, it is important to recognize the distinct challenges faced by families and the systems serving them. This session will provide GALs and others with an overview of the complex immigration legal situations in which families may find themselves, as well as what can be done to assist families. As immigration enforcement looms large in the lives of many immigrant families, this session will also discuss preparing families for the realities of potential enforcement action and safety planning for children and families.

**Wed04: Navigating Challenging Conversations: Building Science-Based Communication Skills**

Jenny Stotts, MS, LSW, *Youth Ombudsman, Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office, ODJFS*

Effective communication can make all the difference when working with people facing challenging circumstances. In this session, Youth Ombudsman Jenny Stotts will dive into practical communication strategies rooted in science that help practitioners meet people where they are and forge productive paths forward. The session will cover the impact of trauma on the way people interact, how to spot opportunities to strengthen relationships through communication in tough situations, and how to adapt communication strategies in response to observed behavior. Participants will leave this interactive session with tools they can use right away to build stronger, more supportive connections.

**Wed05: It's Not the Brady Bunch: Family Effects of Addiction**

Brian L. Bethel, PhD, LPCC-S, LCDC III, RPT-S, *Trauma Therapist, Independent Trainer/Consultant*

While substance use disorders have been designated as complex mental and emotional disorders, they have also been described as a family disease. It is estimated that at least 19 million U.S. children—or one in every four—live with at least one parent or primary caregiver who had a substance use disorder. Parental substance use disorders have far-reaching impacts on the lives of children. This presentation will detail the effects of substance related disorders in the lives of children and explain how advocates can provide support.

**Wed06: Ethics and Professionalism in Child Welfare**

Judge David A. Hejmanowski, *Delaware County Court of Common Pleas, Probate/Juvenile*

The child welfare field is fraught with ethical pitfalls. This presentation, led by a judge with more than two decades of experience presiding over child welfare cases, will review the most common ethical issues faced by CASA volunteers, GALs, and child welfare case

workers, as well as strategies to avoid or respond to them. Through real-world examples, attendees will learn about problems to avoid and strategies to employ. Note: this session is required for local program and Ohio CASA board members.

### **Thursday Plenary Session: The Power of Staying: Connection, Trust, and the Adults Children Remember**

Tristian Smith, MSEM, MSIA, CBCP, PMP, Army Veteran, *Child Advocate, Author, Keynote Speaker, Nebraska CASA, Nebraska Foster Care Review Board*

In this powerful keynote, former foster youth, Nebraska CASA volunteer, and author Tristian Smith shares how instability, loss, and repeated transitions shaped his childhood, and how the steady presence of caring adults helped change the course of his life. Through personal story and practical insight, he will explore why children in foster care often struggle to trust, how adults can connect with youth who seem guarded or resistant, and why consistency matters more than perfection. This keynote will challenge and encourage participants to see advocacy not simply as a role, but as a relationship built through presence, patience, and follow-through. Attendees will leave inspired to consider how the simple act of continuing to show up can become one of the most life-changing gifts a child receives.

### **Thu01: H.U.G.S.: A Practice for Working in the Trenches as a CASA Volunteer or GAL**

James Ellis, Attorney, *Ellis Law Office, LLC*

An important element of serving as a CASA volunteer is learning to effectively collaborate with the other child welfare professionals involved in every case. This workshop will explore H.U.G.S.—a method developed through interviews with judges, magistrates, attorneys, agency personnel, and service providers to encourage positive collaboration with CASA volunteers and GALs. The H.U.G.S. method includes maintaining **h**umility and tolerating **u**ncertainty while holding a sense of **g**ratITUDE in providing a **s**ervice that may not always be welcome.

### **Thu02: Worry Workshop: Helping Kids with Anxiety**

Whitney Raglin Bignall, PhD, *Associate Clinical Director, Leader of Community Impact and Evaluation, The Kids Mental Health Foundation*

This workshop will discuss factors that impact kids' mental health, focusing on common causes of anxiety, anxiety disorders in children, and how to help kids with anxious thoughts. Participants will also talk about the differences between stress and anxiety. CASA volunteers and GALs will learn to spot signs of stress and chronic stress and will also explore the cultural considerations that may shape how symptoms are expressed.

### **Thu03: Know More, Do More: Recognizing and Responding to Stalking**

Dana Fleitman, MA, EdHD, *Senior Training & Awareness Specialist, Stalking Prevention, Awareness, and Resource Center (SPARC)*

Stalking is a prevalent, dangerous, and often misunderstood crime. This session explores the dynamics of stalking, focusing on the highly contextual nature of the crime by discussing common tactics used by perpetrators. It will also explore the co-occurrence of stalking with domestic and sexual violence, as well as tools to plan for victim safety and hold offenders accountable. Participants will be better able to identify stalking behaviors and dynamics, recognize the intersection of stalking with other crimes, and apply strategies for working with victims of stalking.

**Thu04: Preparing for Independence: Building Practical Life Skills, Transition Planning, and Support Services**

Sarah Levels, MSW, *Human Services Developer, Ohio Department of Children and Youth, Bureau of Youth and Young Adult Supports &*

Laurie Wright, MSW, LISW-S, *Human Services Developer, Ohio Department of Children and Youth, Bureau of Youth and Young Adult Supports*

This workshop provides an overview of the life skills and transition planning requirements for youth in foster care as they prepare for adulthood. It highlights practical ways CASA volunteers can help ensure youth develop these life skills, build and maintain connections, and participate in activities similar to their peers not in agency custody. Participants will understand how the concepts of connection, normalcy, and intentional skill building combine to build an environment for youth to thrive while they are in care. Key programs that support independence will also be explored. Attendees will leave with concrete strategies to help young people not only understand their options while in agency custody, but also develop the confidence and skills needed to thrive as they transition to adulthood.

**Thu05: Youth Suicide Prevention in Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice Systems**

Amberle Prater, PhD, LPCC-S, *Suicide Prevention Clinical Lead Supervisor, Nationwide Children's Hospital*

Suicide is a leading cause of death for youth ages 10-24 in the United States. Youth in at-risk populations, such as those involved in child welfare and juvenile justice systems, are at significantly increased risk. In this workshop, attendees will learn about youth suicide prevention with a special focus on at-risk youth. This presentation will provide an overview of current data on suicide risk in youth, share resources for responding to youth suicide risk, and detail how to build protective factors.

**Thu06: From Conversation to Court Report: Communication Skills for CASA Volunteers**

Judge Amy H. Lewis, *Greene County Juvenile Court*

This presentation focuses on effective court communication skills for CASA volunteers, including how to write clear, objective, and fact-based reports that separate observation and facts from opinion. It also covers how to testify in court to present recommendations confidently while grounding statements with specific evidence from records and

interviews. Additional communication skills will be highlighted, including the importance of active listening, professional interviewing techniques with children and caregivers, and how to maintain neutrality when working with conflicting information and recommendations. Overall, the training emphasizes how to provide clear, child-focused reports and testimony to assist the court with making informed judicial decisions.

#### **Thu07: Helping Children Who Have Been Exposed to Domestic Violence**

Kristine Buffington, MSW, LISW-S, *Trainer and Consultant, Buffington Consulting LLC*

This workshop is designed to provide a deeper understanding of the many ways children and adolescents may be exposed to domestic violence and the lasting impact that exposure can have on children across developmental stages. Designed for CASA volunteers, attorney Guardians ad Litem, and other professionals who serve children, this workshop provides practical tools, informed perspectives, and trauma-responsive strategies to better support youth and families impacted by domestic violence. Participants will gain increased insight into the unique needs of children exposed to violence and greater confidence in advocating for the best interests of the children they serve.

#### **Thu08: Communication with Adolescents: Interviewing and "Vibing" with Adolescents: Tools from Anthropology, Psychology and Neuroscience**

Eileen P. Anderson, EdD, *Anne Templeton Zimmerman, MD Professor of Bioethics; Executive Director, Cultural Solutions, LLC, Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine*

This session explores how professionals working with adolescents can strengthen communication and interviewing practices through insights from anthropology, psychology and neuroscience. Drawing on adolescent voices, trauma-informed care principles, and interdisciplinary research, the presentation examines how developmental neurobiology, trauma exposure, relational mistrust, and cultural context shape the ways adolescents communicate, interpret adults, and engage with systems. Participants will learn practical strategies for building trust, conducting trauma-informed interviews, and improving representation of adolescents' lived experiences. Through case-based reflection, applied tools, and concrete interviewing practices, this session equips professionals to better hear, understand, and accurately represent adolescents navigating high-conflict and trauma-affected systems.

#### **Thu09: Working with Autistic Children and Adolescents**

Andrea Witwer, *Licensed Clinical Psychologist, Professor-Clinical Psychiatry and Behavioral Health, The Ohio State University*

This presentation will describe the diagnostic criteria and specifiers of Autism Spectrum Disorder and provide examples of the expression of autistic characteristics in children and adolescents. Information will be provided on associated risk factors and conditions.

Attendees will be given practical tips to consider in their communication with autistic children, and information on the services and supports available.

**Thu10: The Use of Technology to Stalk**

Dana Fleitman, MA, EdHD, *Senior Training & Awareness Specialist, Stalking Prevention, Awareness, and Resource Center (SPARC)*

Stalkers are creative criminals who use—and misuse—a variety of technologies to locate, monitor, contact, and otherwise scare their victims. While helping survivors navigate technology-facilitated stalking can seem intimidating, the reality is that many stalkers leverage common and easy-to-use applications and devices. This session provides concrete strategies to help responders identify technologies being used to facilitate stalking, safety plan with survivors, and preserve evidence. By the end of this presentation, participants will be better able to identify common technologies misused by perpetrators, and consider tools for enhancing victim safety.

**Thu11: Advocating For Children Who Have Been Sexually Abused**

CeCe Norwood, MA, *Co-Founder/CEO, Black Survivors of Sexual Assault Institute*

Child sexual abuse cases remain among the most complex and frequently encountered cases in child welfare. This session will provide attendees with an understanding of child sexual abuse and its impact on children. Discussion will also detail common myths, misconceptions, and biases surrounding child victims and covers the prevalence rates, characteristics, and factors that may influence a child's response to sexual abuse and possible disclosure. The roles and responsibilities of advocates will be highlighted as well as national and local resources.

**Thu12: Responding to the Overdose Crisis: Tools and Knowledge for CASA Volunteers**

Beth Weinstock, MD, *Executive Director, BirdieLight*

This workshop will provide an updated view of the current illicit drug landscape and provide volunteers with the life-saving information needed to confidently address the overdose epidemic. Topics will include the history of the American fentanyl crisis, substance use language and stigma reduction, overdose prevention, and peer-to-peer education. Attendees will leave with practical tools to recognize signs of overdose, respond effectively using evidence-based interventions, and engage youth and families in informed, stigma-free conversations about substance use and safety.

**Thu13: Responding to the Overdose Crisis: Tools and Knowledge for CASA Volunteers**

Beth Weinstock, MD, *Executive Director, BirdieLight*

This is a second offering of session Thu12.

**Thu14: Foster Care Lived Experience Panel**

Daniel Sullenberger, *Lead Staff Attorney, CASA of Franklin County*

Learn firsthand from the experiences of adults with lived experience in the foster care system. This panel of experts will discuss their positive and negative experiences in foster care and will respond to questions from the audience to provide insight into the challenges and impacts of living in the child welfare system. Through these personal perspectives, participants will gain a deeper understanding of how the child welfare system affects the children and families they serve and will be better equipped to provide compassionate, informed, and trauma-responsive support.

**Thu15: Creating Trust and Trauma Informed Strategies for Serving Deaf Children and Families**

Rose Larson, RA, *Executive Director, DWAVE &*

Trenna Paxton, MSW, *Trauma Informed Outreach Advocate, DWAVE*

This workshop explores trauma-informed best practices for working with Deaf children and children with Deaf parents (CODAs). Participants will gain a deeper understanding of communication access, cultural considerations, and the unique barriers Deaf families may experience when interacting with service providers, schools, healthcare systems, and law enforcement. The training will focus on strategies to reduce re-traumatization and re-victimization while promoting safety, trust, accessibility, and empowerment for Deaf children and families.

**Thu16: Advocating for Permanence: Professional Strategies for Adoption Preparation**

Kendall Oliano, LSW, *Training Associate Director, Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption &*

Tara Roberson, *Training Associate Director, Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption*

This workshop will explore the critical work of adoption preparation and how CASA volunteers can effectively advocate for and support this process for the youth they serve. Participants will examine the key elements of effective adoption preparation and the factors that influence readiness, including developmental stage, trauma history, identity, and relationships. The presenters will emphasize the importance of ensuring the youth's voice is at the center of their adoption journey and will reinforce the need for individualized, comprehensive planning to promote successful permanency outcomes for youth before and after adoption.

**Thu17: Ethical AI Use for Child Welfare Professionals**

Joyce Lee, PhD, MSW, MS, LCSW, *Associate Professor, The Ohio State University College of Social Work*

This workshop will introduce ETHICS, an ethical AI framework for social work research published in the Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research. The workshop will go over each of the six principles in ETHICS: Equity, Transparency, Human-Centeredness,

Integrity, Competency, and Safety. Strategies for practical applications of ETHICS principles will be shared, and application examples will be tailored for the child welfare context and child welfare professionals. Participants will walk away with foundational knowledge of the AI ethics framework (e.g., its development, tenets, ethical principles), practical application examples for child welfare specifically, and a template to guide ethical decision-making around responsible AI use in the child welfare profession.

#### **Thu18: Prevention Services for Families Involved with Child Welfare**

Stacey Bergstrom, *Assistant Deputy Director of Protective Services, Fairfield County Job and Family Services &*

Magistrate Michelle Edgar, *Magistrate/Deputy Director of Specialized Dockets and Strategic Initiatives, Fairfield County Juvenile/Probate Court*

Prevention Services are offered to families to prevent the need for children to be removed from their homes or have continued involvement in the child welfare system. This session will explore the ways that Prevention Services are an important part of the continuum of services and interventions by child welfare agencies. They can help to ensure the best interest of the children are always at the forefront of any interventions and ensure only the families that really require court intervention are court involved.

#### **Friday Plenary Session: Polyvagal PLAY: How Safety, Play and Relationships can Change the World**

Sarah Buffie, MSW, LSW, *Founder/Lead Facilitator, Soul Bird Consulting*

You already know this work is relational at its core. This keynote introduces Polyvagal Theory through the lens of Polyvagal PLAY, a trauma-responsive approach using breath, rhythm, sound, and play to support nervous system regulation and felt safety. Through laughter yoga and rhythmic group practices, you will actually feel how safety shifts your system, not just understand it intellectually. You will walk away with practical tools you can weave into the everyday moments of your advocacy work: car rides, courtrooms, transitions, and hard conversations.

#### **Fri01: Advocating for Kids at School**

Jen Newton, PhD, *Associate Professor, Special Education, Ohio University*

This workshop will provide an overview of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to build a stronger understanding of the laws that guide educational practices in schools. Participants will learn about the eligibility process for services under IDEA and strategies for effectively advocating for students to ensure they receive the supports and services guaranteed under the law. The workshop will also explore challenging real-world scenarios that child welfare professionals may encounter in their work, along with practical resources and approaches to help keep the child's educational access and needs at the center of decision-making.

**Fri02: Team Collaboration for Dual Status Youth**

Magistrate Michelle Edgar, *Magistrate/Deputy Director of Specialized Dockets and Strategic Initiatives, Fairfield County Juvenile/Probate Court;*

Bridget Moore, *Family Engagement Specialist, Fairfield County Juvenile/Probate Court;*

Karla Nelson, *Court Program Manager, Fairfield County Protective Services;*

Makaila Tussing, *Specialized Dockets and Strategic Initiatives Coordinator, Fairfield County Juvenile/Probate Court; &*

Marea Wesney, *Placement & Facilitation Supervisor, Fairfield County Protective Services*

When families are involved in multiple systems, it can feel overwhelming and confusing for them to know what is expected from each entity. Collaboration between the entities and families is essential to ensure no duplication of efforts or services and to make it clear to the families and other team members assisting the families who is responsible for which tasks. Fairfield County received a technical assistance grant through the Supreme Court of Ohio to assist in developing and implementing their PACT Initiative (Protecting and Advocating for Families Together). The Fairfield County Team will walk through their efforts in engaging families and developing their processes and procedures to best serve dual status youth.

**Fri03: From Understanding to Embodied Skill: Polyvagal PLAY in Action**

Sarah Buffie, MSW, LSW, *Founder/Lead Facilitator, Soul Bird Consulting*

This breakout session takes what you experienced in the keynote and puts it in your hands. Through structured Polyvagal PLAY practices using rhythm, movement, imagination, and sound, you will build real-time skills for co-regulation and relational presence in your CASA volunteer work. Every practice is grounded in the specific moments you navigate most: transitions, waiting rooms, challenging conversations, and moments of dysregulation. You will leave with embodied confidence in using play not as an activity, but as a relational stance that sustains both the children you serve and yourself.

**Fri04: The Legal Process for GALs**

Daniel Sullenberger, *Lead Staff Attorney, CASA of Franklin County &*

Rachel Thompson, *Staff Attorney, CASA of Franklin County*

This session will go beyond basic legal requirements and look in-depth at the legal options available to guardians ad litem for effective best-interest advocacy at all stages of a juvenile abuse, neglect or dependency case. The presenters will explore the legal framework created by the Ohio Revised Code, court rules, and case law to determine the best practice for providing the court recommendations within the scope of the law and the power of the court. This presentation will include definitions and boundaries implemented by the courts of appeals and the Supreme Court of Ohio and will address motions and

other court documents that can be filed by the attorney GAL to further the best interest of the child.

**Fri05: The Power of One: Understanding the Role of Trusted Adults in Supporting Children and Youth with Incarcerated Parents**

Andre Davis, *Coordinator, Children of Incarcerated Parents Community Advisor, Youth Voices Study, Nationwide Children's Hospital &*  
Ashleigh LoVette, PhD, *Assistant Professor, Director, Youth Voices Study, College of Public Health, The Ohio State University*

Millions of children in the United States share the experience of parental incarceration. Parental incarceration, or having a parent in jail or prison, is often associated with adverse outcomes during both childhood and adulthood. Much of the current work focuses on this negative perspective, but the experience of parental incarceration is not destiny and research has also identified ways to promote well-being among young people with incarcerated parents. This workshop will highlight best practices to support children and youth with incarcerated parents, with a focus on the role of trusted adults. Workshop attendees will have the opportunity to reflect on their personal "power of one" and be introduced to specific resources to support implementation of these practices in their own work.

**Fri06: Caring Without Carrying It All: Compassion Fatigue in Child Welfare Work**

Michaela "Chae" Little, LISW-S, LICDC, *Psychotherapist, Lindner Center of*

Working with children and families who have experienced trauma can be deeply meaningful, but it can also be emotionally demanding. This training explores compassion fatigue, a common experience for professionals and volunteers in child welfare roles such as CASA volunteers, attorneys, caseworkers, magistrates, and other child welfare professionals. Participants will learn to recognize the signs of compassion fatigue and gain practical strategies to maintain healthy boundaries, process difficult experiences, and sustain themselves in this important work. The session focuses on building awareness and resilience so that those who support children and families can continue to do so in a healthy and sustainable way.