

NOTE: This Public Participation Form must be presented to the County Clerk prior to the time the agenda item(s) you wish to address are discussed before the Court.

**BROWN COUNTY COMMISSIONERS COURT
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION FORM**

Instructions: Fill out all appropriate blanks. Please print or write legibly.

NAME:

Michelle Wells DATE: 9-16-2019

ADDRESS:

P.O. Box 2326, Brownwood, Texas 76804

TELEPHONE:

(325) 643-2557

Do you represent any particular group or organization? Yes No (Circle One)

If you do represent a group or organization, please state the name, address and telephone number of such group or organization.

Executive Director, CASA in the Heart of Texas

Which agenda item(s) do you wish to address?

7. B. Public Hearing on Proposed Budget

I am aware that my comments must be limited to the issues relating to the above referenced agenda item(s), and that I will be limited to five (5) minutes for my comments, subject to the discretion of the Court to allow me more time.

I am aware all speakers are required to adhere to the rules of procedure, conduct and decorum adopted by the Court on August 19, 2019.

(Upon completion of this form, please present it to the County Clerk. Unless this form is presented to the County Clerk, you may not be recognized for comments)

September 16, 2019
(Exhibit #4)

Signature: Michelle Wells



P.O. Box 2326
Brownwood, Texas 76804
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E-Mail: casa@casahot.org

September 16, 2019

The Honorable Paul Lilly and Commissioners Court
Brown County Courthouse
200 South Broadway
Brownwood, Texas 76801

Re: Request for Additional Budget Allocation

Dear Judge Lilly and Commissioners:

Brown County has generously supported CASA in the Heart of Texas since 2001. Initially, our program received an allocation through the budget process. In 2015, we began receiving funds through the newly created Child Safety Fund. It was estimated that the funds received would be around \$27,000 per year. That was a large increase from our previous allocation amount, although the funds received by our program have decreased as it is being split among more programs now. We are grateful for the generous support from Brown county, and appreciate this opportunity to address the Commissioners Court.

CASA in the Heart of Texas is a private, non-profit organization serving abused and neglected children from Brown, Comanche, and Mills counties who are in the foster care system. CASA volunteers are appointed as an abused or neglected child's Guardian ad Litem (one who is appointed to protect the best interests of someone considered incompetent or underage for the purposes of a lawsuit or legal action only). As required in the Texas Family Code, CASA Guardian ad Litem interview the child, all parties and service providers, review copies of all relevant records and participate in mediations and staffings. In addition, CASA volunteers may perform specific tasks directed by the Court. CASA Guardian ad Litem strive for better outcomes for the children by providing permanent placement research and options to ensure the best home for the child such as locating appropriate relatives who can take custody of the child in lieu of foster care; and, specifically, researching and monitoring all information and options pertaining to the child's needs. These advocates ensure abused and neglected children receive all available services to meet their needs. Because they are committed to serve the child throughout the entire placement process, CASA volunteers are many times the only constant in the child's life. CASA volunteers help children move forward as they transition into permanent placement, focusing on the well-being of the child throughout the process.

According to federal mandate and Texas law, the Court must appoint children in protective custody an Attorney ad Litem and a Guardian ad Litem. Either an attorney or a CASA volunteer may be appointed as the Guardian ad Litem. An attorney is reimbursed by the county for the time spent representing the child. Currently, the rate of reimbursement for attorneys in Brown county is **\$75 per hour**. A CASA Guardian ad Litem volunteers their time and effort and has a great deal more time and attention to devote to the role. Further, CASA volunteers receive extensive training regarding their role as Guardian ad Litem. The CASA volunteer is able to gather correct information, assess the child's needs and advocate for them in as well as outside of the courtroom.

In reviewing the data published by the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) regarding the children in the conservatorship of Child Protective Services (CPS) from Brown county over the past several years, the numbers have dramatically increased, as outlined below.

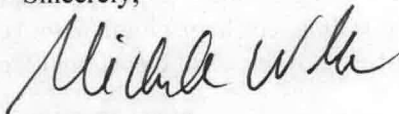
Fiscal Year	# of Removals	# of Children in Conservatorship
2013	29	136
2014	51	124
2015	70	160
2016	108	211
2017	144	306
2018	106	295

While our program was initially appointed to all of the new removals in Brown county, that is no longer the case. Due to the dramatic increase in the number of children coming into care, our program has struggled to recruit and train an adequate number of volunteers to serve all of the children who need an advocate. As a result, the number of children being served by a paid Guardian ad Litem has also increased dramatically. During Fiscal Year 2018, our program was appointed to 44 new children in Brown county and served a total of 87 children from Brown county. That means that we were only able to serve around 30% of the children that needed a CASA advocate. It should be noted that during that time period, CASA advocates reported spending around **2,000 hours** in advocating for the children of Brown county. If those hours were billed at the rate of the paid Guardian ad Litem, it would cost **\$150,000**. It is our goal to increase the percentage of children being served to at least 80% of the children in care.

During the coming year, CASA will increase our presence in Brown county in an effort to educate the community about the opportunity to serve abused and neglected children through our program. It is anticipated that will result in an increase in the number of advocates available to serve, which in turn will increase the number of children served. CASA in the Heart of Texas respectfully requests an additional allocation in the amount of **\$5,000** to help us in those efforts. The funds would be used in recruiting and training new advocates as well as retaining the current advocates we have.

Having a trained CASA advocate in the role of Guardian ad Litem rather than a paid attorney results in the child and their family having access to more resources and services, which will assist in the healing process. By having their needs met, the child will hopefully be able to thrive, eventually blossoming into a healthy, productive member of our community! Thanks again for Brown county's generous past support of our program. We are blessed to have people like each of you serving in our local government.

Sincerely,



Michelle Wells
Executive Director