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## OPEN FORUM *On Foster Youth*

# Resolve to help our most vulnerable children

By Paul Knudsen

**T**he stress on families from the pandemic — death of a loved one, job loss, societal unrest and economic insecurity — inevitably impacts children, especially our most vulnerable youth in foster care. As parents and caregivers struggle with exacerbating economic, physical and mental health crises, children are often the collateral damage: physically and emotionally abused, neglected, even abandoned.

Because of COVID-19, we are seeing a confluence of all these crises and children are suffering.

The number of new reports to child welfare agencies of abuse and neglect has plummeted this year, as vulnerable children no longer have regular contact with those who normally report signs of abuse: teachers, pediatricians, coaches and extracurricular programs. We expect a significant increase of children

coming into foster care in 2021 as schools and other programs reopen.

Youth in foster care have always been more reliant on schools, sports and other programs for a sense of normalcy and community, since they've been removed from the only community they know. Instead, 2020 has brought isolation. Family visits have often been curtailed and foster youth have had even less freedom than normal to develop friendships and explore interests. Young adults in foster care who had been transitioning toward independence have lost jobs, educational opportunities and other supports vital to their successful transition.

In San Francisco, there is a well-established nonprofit organization serving foster children: San Francisco Court Appointed Special Advocates (SFCASA). We provide trained volunteers who stand ready to advocate for and mentor children in foster care one on one. CASAs are life-



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### Get Involved

To learn how you can become a CASA or support San Francisco CASA, go to [www.sfcasa.org](http://www.sfcasa.org)

lines to foster children suffering in isolation during this pandemic. They make sure that the child is doing well, connecting with them in person when possible, and by phone, FaceTime and other means. In San Francisco right now, our volunteers are making sure foster children have what they need to be in school remotely, from technology to

tutors and other support.

At San Francisco CASA, we have 325 volunteers trained and helping children in need but there is a critical need for more CASAs.

Because so much child abuse and neglect has gone unnoticed and unreported, the consequences for our state are enormous. We already have the highest rate of child poverty in the nation, and California has more children in foster care than any state — nearly 90,000. We fear for what is to come in 2021 and expect San Francisco's foster care system to see more than 1,000 youth.

What can be done? With funding from donors and the participation of our community, additional CASA volunteers can be deployed as an important support for children. The time is right for more members of our community to make the New Year's resolution to help a child.

Thankfully, the federal government and state have ex-

tended foster care to those young adults who otherwise would have lost support as they turn 21 this year. SFCASA is also making a special effort to provide additional supports to transition-aged youth approaching high school graduation, college transitions, the workforce or the end of foster care.

CASAs are often the most stable, dependable adult in a foster child's life.

They offer one-to-one emotional support and guidance through the confusing and frightening foster care, educational and health care systems. CASAs are a trusted friend for the child and work as a team member with social workers to serve the interests of children.

CASAs are a beacon of hope for foster children, and they have never been needed more.

*Paul Knudsen is the interim executive director of SFCASA.*