



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Timothy M. Kennedy

## Kennedy: 4 out of 5 At-Risk Youth in Erie County Do Not Have Access to Critical Mental Health Services; Urges Expanded Mental Health Care for Local Children

TIMOTHY M. KENNEDY April 18, 2013

| ISSUE: **FAMILIES, CHILDREN, YOUTH, COURTS, FAMILY**



*Kennedy secures \$800,000 in state budget to preserve the Erie County Mental Health Association's Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) program, says more funding is needed next year.*

*CASA program able to serve 200 of the 1000 at-risk children in need of help in Erie County; MHA, with Kennedy's support, is pushing to expand the program.*

*Kennedy: Mental Health Needs of Children are All Too Often Overlooked, Until It's Too Late. Early Intervention for Mental Health Issues Saves Lives and Saves Taxpayer Dollars.*

BUFFALO, N.Y. – Senator Tim Kennedy, D-Buffalo, and the Erie County Mental Health Association (MHA) revealed today that despite the recent push in Albany to address mental health issues, four out of five at-risk children in Erie County do not have adequate access to mental health services. Funding for innovative initiatives, like the Court-Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) program, is critical to preventing children with mental health issues from making destructive, costly or even deadly decisions in the future. That’s why Kennedy and MHA are building on the momentum of the past four months and pushing the state to invest more resources into mental health care for Western New York children.

This year, Kennedy and legislative leaders worked to restore \$800,000 in state funding for CASA in the 2013-14 state budget, and \$60,000 of that will go to support the program in Erie County. Funding for this program, which provides support for at-risk youth, was zeroed out in December 2012, just hours after the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary.

“As the father of three young children, my heart aches for abused and neglected children who go through foster care and the family court system. CASA volunteers are the guardian angels of our family court system,” said Senator Kennedy. “I was proud to work with Governor Cuomo and legislative leaders to restore funding to the CASA program this year, but more work needs to be done. It is simply unacceptable that four out of five children in Western New York do not have access to the mental health care they so desperately need. Investing in mental health services for children saves taxpayer dollars and more importantly, saves lives.”

CASA is a national program that provides volunteer advocates for abused and neglected children in foster care and the family court system. In 2012, 40 CASA volunteers in Erie County advocated for nearly 200 children, most of them victims of abuse and neglect, helping them find permanence and stability in their lives. While the restoration of funds in the state budget is a huge victory for Erie County, Kennedy and the MHA say hundreds more

at-risk children need and deserve access to this vital support network.

“When funding for the CASA program was abruptly terminated, Senator Kennedy became a powerful advocate, working tirelessly for the restoration of this vital program,” said the Executive Director of the Mental Health Association Kenneth Houseknecht. “He helped lead a statewide effort, which culminated in the full restoration of the CASA program across New York. On behalf of our 40 CASA volunteers and the nearly 200 children served by this program in Erie County, we are grateful for his unwavering support. We join Senator Kennedy in continuing to push for increased funds for mental health services at the state level.”

“On behalf of the children in Erie County that benefit from a CASA volunteer, I wish to express my gratitude to Senator Kennedy and the entire Western New York delegation for their support and commitment to our CASA program,” said Jodi Johnson, CASA program director. “Because of our local representatives leading the statewide efforts to restore funding, the CASA program will be able to continue to train local volunteers, who directly assist abused and neglected children in reaching their full potential and permanency, as quickly as possible. CASA is vital in assisting Erie County Family Court judges in determining what is in a child’s best interest.”

Kennedy and MHA also expressed deep gratitude for the generosity of E.J. and Karen Butler and the Edward “Doc” Butler Family Foundation. They have led the community in stepping up for local kids and will be contributing \$100,000 to the CASA program over the next five years. It’s a long-term commitment to help the program serve more Erie County children.

The CASA Program assigns trained volunteers appointed by Family Court judges as advocates for abused and neglected children. Volunteers must be at least 21 years of age, and after successfully completing 30 hours of training and extensive background screening, they

are sworn in by a Family Court judge. The next CASA training class will begin in September 2013. It will be held at MHA's offices at 999 Delaware Avenue in Buffalo. An Independent Study Training is available immediately.

###

*Senator Timothy M. Kennedy represents the New York State Senate's 63rd District, which is comprised of the town of Cheektowaga, the city of Lackawanna and nearly all of the city of Buffalo. More information is available at <http://kennedy.nysenate.gov>.*