

Volunteers become court advocates for kids

By Traci Street

Of the Tobacco Valley News

Two new advocates for children in foster care in the Tobacco Valley area were sworn in by Judge Matthew Cuffe last month.

Willow Ellcey of Fortine and Stephanie Mullany of Rexford are new volunteers for CASA, or Court Appointed Special Advocates of Lincoln County.

Volunteers in the CASA

program act as the voice for foster children within the court system. The volunteers go through rigorous training, and afterwards, are assigned to a child or children in foster care. They spend time with the children to develop a relationship, and are tasked with making the court process less scary for the kids and reporting to the judge what might be best for the child.

The CASA of Lincoln County organization is in its

first year of operations after spinning off from the Flathead County arm of CASA. The group is a non-profit that takes cases specifically within Lincoln County, but is not run by the county government itself.

For the last year or so, the Eureka area has had two trained volunteers, said executive director Keeli Anderson.

With the addition of Ellcey and Mullany, the Tobacco Valley area has doubled

its number of volunteers. Because the group tries to place the kids with volunteers who are in close physical proximity to the cases, Anderson said it was nice that Ellcey is located in Fortine and Mullany in Rexford, spreading out the volunteer base. "I feel like we're pretty well rounded for advocates in that area," she said.

Ellcey decided to get in-

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involved after being a foster parent herself, and seeing firsthand the lack of support for kids and foster parents who find themselves in that system. "We are 100 percent voices for these kiddos. We get to scoop up these little ones and that's all we're there for, it's life changing for them," Ellcey said. Ellcey has currently agreed to take on her first case, and is expecting the paperwork to be completed soon, at which

time she'll be able to meet and begin connecting with any children assigned to her.

Ellcey said through her training, she learned that the main goal of the court and child protective services is reunification of the family, if at all possible. Ellcey is going to school to become an addictions counselor, and said she sees becoming a CASA advocate as an extension of that work. "The human beings that need that substance abuse support often have kiddos," Ellcey said. It's an area of service she is excited

and passionate about, and hopes to be able to offer services in the Tobacco Valley that go hand in hand with one another.

Mullany has lived in Rexford for six years and is a retired psychiatrist.

Mullany said she had been considering getting involved for a while but couldn't do so because of her work. Now that she has the time, she is looking forward to being part of what she called "a worthy endeavor". Mullany said she always wanted to do something to give back, be-

cause she had been given so much by others in her lifetime. Mullany spoke fondly of a language teacher who was a mentor to her and took her under his wing. "I'm really hoping that I can, you know, give to a child or children the things that were very generously given to me," she said.

Being an advocate is a needed service, but in some ways she is hopeful that she actually won't be that busy. "Hopefully I will never have to do it," she said. She said she would be just as happy if no children needed CASA's services, because that would mean no children were in the foster care system.

For Ellcey, she feels creating a more cohesive set of services for kids and adults alike can only benefit families as a whole, and she is looking forward to being a part of that. "This is the beginning of something, we're going to have to build it together," she said.

In addition to advocates that work directly with children, the organization is currently seeking a Tobacco Valley-based board member.