

Features

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## CASA volunteers box up a lot of love



A COURT APPOINTED Special Advocate volunteer loads up the box lunches for delivery to the many supporters who bought lunches. The \$10 lunches need to be ordered by March 4 to be delivered on March 2 Democrat file photo

One of the best things about a box lunch is not having to pack it yourself and if you order a CASA box lunch by March 4, you will get a good lunch with little work.

The 15th annual CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate) Kids Box Lunch Fundraiser delivers box lunches with turkey or veggie wraps, chips, cookies and Barsotti Apple Juice to a wide variety of places and people. It's a \$10 cost that pays off in a big way to serve and advocate for children in El Dorado County who are in the child welfare system due to abuse and/or neglect. The lunches will be delivered on Thursday, March 24, by noon.

Just as it takes a lot of specially trained volunteers to advocate for, support and guide a child through the complicated court system, it takes a lot of volunteers and planning to build and deliver 3,000 lunches.

Laurie Heyman, CASA Events and Outreach Manager, says the Diamond Springs Firefighters Hall is reserved for the assembly of the lunches months in advance of the March event.

In January, Heyman starts recruiting her "Friends of CASA" volunteers and in February, volunteers like Janet Kanter, start showing up at businesses with order forms.

"I used to be in sales, so I'm very efficient with my route through Cameron Park and Shingle Springs businesses," said Kanter, 57. She's been dropping off and picking up box lunch order forms for six years, as well as helping with the lunch assembly.

"I used to be a recipient of the lunches and I always thought one day if my schedule allowed, I'd like to help. It was always so fun to open the box and find everything there," said Kanter. "You can order two — one for today and one for tomorrow. I used to order one for me and one for my husband and take

them home so we could eat them together.”

Starting from a list of businesses that ordered lunches the previous year, Kanter drops off order forms and then, a week or two later, she picks them up along with the \$10 fee for each lunch.

“Sometimes each person will pay for their own lunch; sometimes one person will pay for the whole office and sometimes the office manager collects the money from everyone and gives CASA one check — we try to make it as easy as possible for everyone to participate.”

Once the final count of orders is determined, Heyman orders the food and materials for the lunches. The day before the event, volunteers pick up the groceries and start the prep work which includes setting up the assembly tables and chopping the vegetables. At 4:30 a.m. on “Box Lunch Day,” the first volunteers arrive to assemble the lunches.

“I’m an early bird, just naturally caffienated,” said Pam Stoddard, who was a CASA advocate and has volunteered for the lunch assembly for 5 years. “It’s fun, fast and furious. We play great music and get amped up. It’s a smooth running machine that we’ve got down to a science.”

About 130 volunteers work at two long lines of assembly tables making veggie and turkey wraps, bagging cookies, wrapping juices, refilling stations, preparing the lunches to be delivered and separating the orders. “I love doing the assembly and I’m a perfectionist,” said Kanter. “I want every lunch to look beautiful.”

Last year, all 3,000 lunches were ready for delivery by 8:15 a.m, a new CASA record.

Twenty to 35 volunteers begin the deliveries before 8 a.m. Amy Poole, a CASA Board member, coordinates the deliveries.

“We deliver all the way from Pollock Pines to Folsom,” said Poole, 28. “There’s a lot of juggling and it helps that I know the community and when the businesses open.”

Volunteers work in teams of two, one to drive and the other to hop out and deliver lunches and they take multiple routes so as to have all the lunches delivered by noon.

“We have the best volunteers ever. They are stellar,” said Poole.

During Poole’s first year as route coordinator, a driver called in at 10:30 a.m. and said they weren’t going to be able to make the delivery deadline by noon.” But they brought the lunches back to the Firefighters Hall and we all divided them up and got them delivered on time.”

This is Poole’s fifth year volunteering for the box lunch event. Pregnant with twins and with a two year old at home, this year will be a challenge for Poole, but she said, “It’s such an encouraging atmosphere. It’s fun for the drivers and the community is so receptive and supportive of this event. That’s the best part of it.”

ReMax Real Estate agent Gay Berge, 59, is one of the delivery drivers. She is a former CASA advocate and caseworker and has been a delivery volunteer for seven or eight years.

“Sometimes I drive and sometimes I hop out and deliver,” said Berge. “Last year, we delivered more than 200 lunches to the county offices, including the County Office of Education. My partner, Don, works for the county and he knows where everything is.” Berg said she can fit 12 lunches in a soft sided suitcase and she makes a lot of trips.

“It’s a lot of fun and a wonderful cause,” said Berg. “I take off a day of work to do this, but I’m glad to help.”

Eight dollars from every \$10 box lunch goes back to CASA, said Heyman. The program now has about 150 trained volunteers who advocate for the best interests of more than 400 children annually, providing a voice for children and a bulwark against a system that can be impersonal and frightening.

To order a CASA box lunch and support the advocacy program, call 530-622-9882 by March 4. The cost is \$10 per lunch and checks can be made out to CASA El Dorado and sent to CASA El Dorado, 347 Main St., Placerville, 95667.

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