**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

Contact: Tracey Heisler, Executive Director

Phone: (908) 689-5515

Email: [tracey@casashaw.org](mailto:tracey@casashaw.org)

**CASA SHaW Hosting Racial Equity Circles**

**Lebanon, NJ (November 9)** – Court Appointed Special Advocates of Somerset, Hunterdon, and Warren Counties (CASA SHaW) has announced that the nonprofit is hosting a series of racial equity circles for volunteers, board, and staff members.  The organization has been working for the last few years to understand and dismantle systemic and internal racism to ensure quality advocacy for children in foster care and to diversify the organization’s board and volunteer pool so they better reflect the children who are served. This focus was the result of learning that a disproportionate number of black and brown children have long been overrepresented in the foster care system, despite data that suggests that child abuse and neglect is no greater in African American or Latino families than in White families.

“We are proud to have been at the forefront of this pressing community issue that deeply affects the children and families we serve.  We have provided our advocates, board, staff, and community stakeholders with multiple opportunities to engage in anti-bias trainings. Now, the next step for us is to create safe and respectful spaces to talk and learn about these issues from each other,” said Tracey Heisler, Executive Director of CASA SHaW.  “The multi-faceted issues that surround racial equity have been placed front and center this year; I’m glad we’ve been ahead of the curve,” said Heisler.

From November to March, peer leaders are hosting monthly discussion groups that will focus on a specific race-based subject.  The first area of focus is the Black experience, with Hispanic, White, Asian, Native American, and multi-racial experiences to follow.  “The idea behind the racial equity circles is that if we as individuals take time to understand one another's experiences in an intimate and respectful way, we will be better advocates for the foster children that are served,” Heisler explained.

The county-based meetings will be held via Zoom due to COVID-19 restrictions, with a group solely for African Americans for the first few meetings. Heisler says, “We want to protect our friends' hearts from any more trauma and give them some space to process their own experiences while the rest of us explore our own understandings and feelings.  This is one step in the process of how we can all do our part to promote racial equity.”

CASA of Somerset, Hunterdon, and Warren Counties is part of a statewide network of community-based, non-profit programs that recruit, screen, train and supervise volunteers to “Speak Up for a Child” removed from home due to abuse or neglect. CASA is the only program in New Jersey that uses trained volunteers to work one-on-one with children, ensuring that each one gets the services needed and achieves permanency in a safe, nurturing home. To find a local CASA program in your county, visit [www.casaofnj.org](http://www.casaofnj.org).

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