

Nebraska CASA Conference Program



Opening Reception

5:30 to 8:30 pm Friday *in Diamond Rooms 4, 5, 9 & 10*



Got Hope?

with **Julia Cook**, M.S. and national award-winning children's author, counselor, and parenting expert

Enjoy our festive, casual affair while networking and enjoying some of the best food Kearney has to offer! Julia Cook, Music Bingo, cash bar, beverages, and tasty bites in a welcoming and friendly atmosphere.

Conference Prizes will be provided during Music Bingo! This energetic, fun, and music filled game includes a mixture of music everyone loves. Be entertained, sing along, and laugh out loud while you have chances to win prizes from CASA in a fun and friendly competition!



Christina Millsap
Nebraska CASA
Association
Training Director



Elliott Piper
The Music
Bingo People

Saturday 2025 Nebraska CASA Conference Welcome



9:00 to 9:15 am Saturday morning *Diamond Rooms 4, 5, 9 & 10*



Corrie Kielty
Nebraska CASA Association
Executive Director

Guiding Hearts with a Championship Attitude: Why Your Mindset Matters in the Fight for Nebraska's Kids

9:00 to 10:10 a.m. *Diamond Rooms 4, 5, 9 & 10*

Whether you're a CASA volunteer, judge, attorney, caseworker, or child welfare professional, your role in Nebraska's foster care system is vital. In this uplifting and honest keynote, **Aaron Davis** draws from life experience and championship principles to encourage the everyday heroes working to ensure every child in foster care feels safe, seen, and supported.



Through powerful stories and real talk, Aaron reminds us that attitude is our secret weapon—fueling our purpose when systems are challenging, people disagree, and the weight feels too heavy. You'll leave feeling recharged, reconnected to your why, and reminded that your work truly changes lives.

Aaron Davis is a nationally renowned speaker, author, and member of the 1994 National Championship Nebraska Football Team who has inspired over a million people with his message on performing like a champion. A leading expert on the power of a positive attitude, Aaron blends real-world wisdom—from mopping floors as a kid to surviving cancer and leading in business—to show how a winning mindset drives personal and professional success. A University of Nebraska psychology graduate, he's worked with major organizations like Walmart, ConAgra, and Texas A&M, and continues to motivate audiences through speaking, business leadership, and his weekday morning radio show.

Session 1: Joy: It's an Inside Job

10:30 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. Diamond 1

In this heartfelt and engaging talk, Julia Cook shares insights she's learned over the years: while happiness is fleeting, joy is a steady state of contentment that withstands life's chaos. Through relatable stories and practical tools, Julia guides us to:

- *Shift from chasing temporary happiness to cultivating lasting joy*
- *Create self-care habits that prevent burnout and compassion fatigue*
- *Inspire others to discover their own inner joy*
- *Rekindle our passion for the work we do*

Joy transforms how we see challenges and renews our sense of purpose. You'll laugh, you'll reflect—and you'll leave with a plan to bring more joy into your life and the lives of those you serve.



Julia Cook, M.S. is a national award-winning children's author, counselor, and parenting expert.

She has presented in thousands of schools nationally and internationally, regularly speaks at education and counseling conferences, and has published almost one hundred children's books on a wide range of character and social development topics. The goal behind Cook's work is to actively involve young people in fun, memorable stories and teach them to become lifelong problem solvers. Inspiration for her books comes from working with children and carefully listening to counselors, parents, and teachers, in order to stay on top of needs in the classroom and at home. Cook has the innate ability to enter the worldview of a child through storybooks, giving children both the "what to say" and the "how to say it."

Session 2: Passing the Plate – Crafting Your Personal CASA Story, Part I

10:30 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. Diamond 2



This session introduces participants to the basics of storytelling and walks them through personalizing the generic CASA pitch with their own experience. Participants will hone their messages and share them with one another. Participants will learn the importance of:

- **Authenticity:** Sharing vs. Selling
- **Personalization:** Putting the listener "in the room" with the story
- **Story Technique:** Understanding beginning, middle, and end, etc.
- **Customization:** Adjusting your approach to who you are talking to, finding commonality

Matt Elwell, CPTD founded PLAY Polarities® to teach employees to be improvisers and organizations to be ensembles. As an improviser, Matt has performed for organizations like Second City Theatricals, ComedySportz, and iO. As a learning consultant, he has designed highly engaging and interactive learning experiences for hundreds of organizations, including AT&T, CenturyLink, and McDonald's. A Certified Professional in Talent Development since 2009, Matt has shared his insights on learning and improvisation at both professional and academic conferences. Matt currently splits his time between facilitating personal and professional development programs, teaching and performing improv, and serving as Chief of Staff for Burnham Nationwide, Inc.

Session 3: Introduction to Early Childhood Mental Health

10:30 - 12:00 p.m. *Diamond 3*



Learn about development and attachment in early childhood and providing a simplified understanding of how traumatic events in a child's life can alter that development and impact attachment. Jason will also review different ways utilize to assess the needs in young children and provide a basic understanding of some of the types of therapies used when working with children who have experienced trauma.

Jason Dillard is an outpatient therapist who works in Lexington Nebraska. He graduated from the University of Nebraska Lincoln in 2010 with a Bachelor of Arts degree and then completed his Master's degree in clinical mental health counseling at the University of

Nebraska Kearney in 2017. He has been practicing since June of 2017 at Plum Creek Medical Group. Jason lives in Lexington with his wife and three children.

Session 4: Parent Attorney Role –

Elizabeth J. Klingelhoef, JD & Rebecca Chasek, JD

10:30 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. *Diamond 6*

This session provides an overview of special considerations for parent's attorneys in juvenile cases, particularly issues related to representing indigent clients in juvenile cases such as: what it means to be indigent, pre-adjudication services, efforts to reunify, and representing clients with companion criminal cases.

Rebecca Chasek is a solo criminal defense attorney based in western Nebraska. Since 2018, she has served as the Dawes County Public Defender. Rebecca earned her law degree from the University of Nebraska College of Law in 2017 and returned to her hometown of Chadron.

She has been actively involved in juvenile court throughout her career, representing juveniles, parents, custodians, and guardians, and also serving as a guardian ad litem.

Outside of her legal work, Rebecca enjoys spending time with her fiancé and their two dogs—and most of all, she cherishes being a mom.



Elizabeth J. Klingelhoef is a shareholder and attorney at Jacobsen Orr in Kearney. She graduated from the University of South Dakota School of Law in 2015, and after law school she clerked for Federal Judge Lange in Pierre, SD. She has been at Jacobsen Orr since 2016 and practices in a wide variety of areas, primarily in litigation. She has been a guardian ad litem and has represented parents in juvenile proceedings, including on appeal. She is also Past-President of Kearney/Buffalo County CASA and served in various roles on that Board for approximately 6 years. She lives in Amherst with her husband, Adam, and two boys.

Session 5: Talking to Brick Walls: Hearing What Your Teen Isn't Saying

10:30 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. *Diamond 7*



In this breakout session, parents will explore the emotional disconnect that often emerges during adolescence and how to respond with empathy rather than frustration. Drawing from the themes of *Talking to Brick Walls*, this session offers real-life insight and practical strategies for rebuilding trust, fostering honest dialogue, and understanding the hidden pressures teenagers face. Leave equipped with tools to better navigate emotional walls, interpret silence as communication, and create a climate where their teen feels safe being real.

Mike Donahue is the founder and director of Value Up, a Nebraska-based, nationally recognized organization focused on promoting positive school culture and student well-being. Over the past 30 years, Mike has spoken to over one million students worldwide and authored four books, including *Reinventing My Normal* and *Value Up*.

Recognized as a leading voice on issues such as respect, bullying, resilience, and school climate, Mike is a highly sought-after speaker known for his authenticity and dynamic delivery. A U.S. Air Force veteran originally from Boston, he now lives in Minden, Nebraska with his wife Rachel and their five children.



Volunteer Impact Lunch, 'I Need a LARGE Re-Charge!'

12:00 to 1:15 p.m. *Diamond Room 4,5,9,& 10*



**Welcome from
Philana Blakely**
Nebraska CASA Association
Board of Directors President

In this interactive, fun-filled talk, **Julia Cook** identifies the key ingredients of mental wellness. She will also offer effective strategies for building and maintaining well-being.

Enjoy listening as you grow STRONGER TOGETHER! You'll laugh, you'll cry... but most important you will walk away with tools you can use for a lifetime of healthy!



Afternoon Breakout Sessions



Afternoon Session 1: Unlearning Helplessness: Motivating the Underachiever

1:45 - 3:00 p.m. Diamond 1

Underachieving occurs when students have a significant gap between their abilities, and what they achieve in school. In this interactive session, Julia will discuss the four types of underachievers, explore the characteristics and causes of underachieving, and present effective solutions that can reverse this problem.

Julia Cook, M.S. is a national award-winning children's author, counselor, and parenting expert. She has presented in thousands of schools nationally and internationally, regularly speaks at education and counseling conferences, and has published almost one hundred children's books on a wide range of character and social development topics. The goal behind Cook's work is to actively involve young people in fun, memorable stories and teach them to become lifelong problem solvers. Inspiration for her books comes from working with children and carefully listening to counselors, parents, and teachers, in order to stay on top of needs in the classroom and at home. Cook has the innate ability to enter the worldview of a child through storybooks, giving children both the "what to say" and the "how to say it."

Afternoon Session 2: Practice Passing – Communication Training for Sharing Your CASA Story. Part II

1:45 - 3:00 p.m. *Diamond 2*

Where the morning session stressed the importance of preparedness in sharing your CASA story, our afternoon breakout focuses on practice and improvisation. This session will use scenarios and roleplay to give participants multiple opportunities to practice their story with different kinds of people. In between each round of practice, participants will learn a

ifferent element of improvisation that helps performers hold an audience's attention. As the practice is the critical part of this session, these improv lessons will be offered time permitting:

- Status: Understanding the subconscious expectations of speaker and listener.
- Responsiveness: Adjusting your communication based on the cues of your listener.
- Tone of Voice: Using inflection, cadence, pause, etc. to be a more engaging communicator.



Matt Elwell, CPTD founded PLAY Polarities® to teach employees to be improvisers and organizations to be ensembles. As an improviser, Matt has performed for organizations like Second City Theatricals, ComedySportz, and iO. As a learning consultant, he has designed highly engaging and interactive learning experiences for hundreds of organizations, including AT&T, CenturyLink, and McDonald's. A Certified Professional in Talent Development since 2009, Matt has shared his insights on learning and improvisation at both professional and academic conferences. Matt currently splits his time between facilitating personal and professional development programs, teaching and performing improv, and serving as Chief of Staff for Burnham Nationwide, Inc.

**Session 3: Effective Partnerships with Nebraska
Department of Health and Human Services, Child and Family Services**

1:45 p.m. - 3:00 p.m. *Diamond 3*

Join a panel of experienced DHHS caseworkers as they walk through the difficult decisions surrounding child removal and the steps taken afterward to support the child and family. Learn how Child and Family Services navigates safety planning, court involvement, family engagement, and service coordination throughout a case. This session offers insight into the real-life challenges, goals, and collaboration opportunities CASA volunteers can expect when working alongside caseworkers.

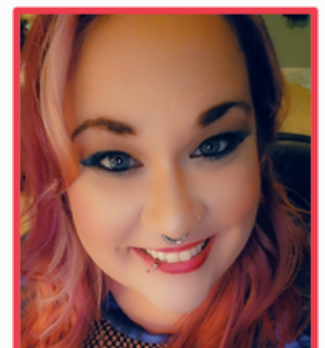
Attend to learn how to best communicate with DHHS effectively!

Syerra Watson also worked as an Ongoing Case Manager for 3.5 years, primarily in the Columbus, Seward, and York areas. She has experience in both ongoing and permanency work. Syerra has experience providing intensive family preservation services to families with youth on probation. She recently obtained her Master of Social Work MSW and is in the process of obtaining her mental health and substance use counseling credentials.



Hayley McGuire also worked as an Ongoing Case Manager for 5 years in the Norfolk, Columbus, and Fremont areas. Hayley brings a wealth of knowledge to the panel including the Safe & Together model focusing on keeping children with their non-offending caregivers.

Serina Plympton also has more than five years of experience in case management across central Nebraska. She previously worked as a Youth Program Specialist at the Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Center in Kearney. Serina is passionate about youth advocacy, trauma-informed care, and creating inclusive training for new CFS workers. Her work is rooted in equity, empathy, and a strong commitment to supporting both staff and families.



Afternoon Session 5: CASA Court Report Writing Made Easy(ish) Cindy Reed, Linda Shaw & Shelby Pedersen 1:45 - 3:00 p.m. *Diamond 6*

Join us for an interactive session where CASA volunteers will explore the essential elements of writing an effective court report. Whether you're new to writing reports or looking to refine your skills, this session will provide practical strategies for creating clear, factual, and impactful reports that support judicial decision-making.

Participants will learn how to incorporate unbiased observations, elevate the youth's voice, highlight well-being and normalcy efforts, and make the most of their local program resources. With a focus on clarity and purpose, this training will help ensure that your court reports truly reflect the advocacy efforts made by CASAs in their cases.

Cindy Reed, MPA is a seasoned youth advocate with over 15 years of experience in empowering young people, fostering meaningful partnerships, and guiding non-profit leaders. Throughout her career, she has worked directly with youth, partnered with agencies and programs to engage young people at local, state, and national levels of leadership, and supported organizations in creating more inclusive, effective practices.



Linda Shaw has been with CASA for 17 years. She has been the Program Director for the Dawson/Gosper County CASA Program for the past 13 years. She has a passion for CASA Reports and has overseen CASA Reports for over 600 children from 95 volunteers to 6 different judges. She is proud to have 100% child/CASA representation for the counties she serves.

Shelby Pedersen began her career in child welfare as a Child and Family Services Specialist, where she gained firsthand experience writing and reading court reports that directly impacted case outcomes. Over the years, she's worked in early childhood home visiting, served as an advocate with the BraveBe Child Advocacy Center, volunteered as a CASA, and parented as a foster mom alongside a CASA volunteer. Now the Executive Director of Southeast Nebraska CASA, Shelby brings a well-rounded perspective to the importance of clear, accurate, and impactful court reporting—drawing from her experiences across the child welfare system.



Afternoon Session 4: Thinking Inside the Circle: Strengthening Support in ICWA Cases

1:45 - 3:00 p.m. *Diamond 7*

In this interactive session, participants will explore how to support Native children and families in ways that honor tribal sovereignty, cultural identity, and the spirit of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). Participants will get an overview of the Federal and State ICWAs, including the importance of placement preferences and active efforts, and about the cultural and historical contexts that continue to shape family involvement today. This session will help you build deeper cultural understanding, strengthen relationships with tribal partners, and become more effective in ICWA-eligible cases. Come prepared to listen, learn, and expand your role within the circle of support.

Kitty Washburn, LMSW, LSW, holds a bachelor's degree in social work from Briar Cliff University and a master's degree in social work from the University of Iowa. Kitty is currently working for the Nebraska Indian Child Welfare Coalition (NICWC), where she has been since November 2021. Prior to that, she worked for the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska for 11 years. During her time with the Tribe, she served in various roles, including caseworker, family support worker, CFS Supervisor, and CFS Program Manager. Her current role with NICWC is Tribal Liaison, where she works to develop advocacy and support structures for Native families and Tribes. She is a licensed social worker in Iowa and Colorado.



Judge's Perspective Panel County Juvenile Court Judges

3:15 p.m - 4:30 p.m. *Diamond Room 4, 5, 9, & 10*



Hear directly from a panel of county court judges about the decision-making process in child welfare cases. From removal hearings to permanency planning, the judges will share what they consider in court, how they balance legal standards with the best interests of the child, and what they value in CASA reports and recommendations. This session offers a unique opportunity to better understand the role of the court and how CASA volunteers can make a meaningful impact through effective advocacy.



The Honorable Jeffrey M. Wightman has served on the Dawson County Court bench since 2013. A member of the Nebraska Bar since 1993, he was also Executive Editor of the Nebraska Law Review and was named a Nebraska State Bar Foundation Fellow in 2004. His legal and judicial career reflects a deep commitment to the legal profession and public service.

The Honorable John P. Rademacher was pointed to the Buffalo County Court in 2014. He has been a member of the Nebraska Bar since 1996. Judge Rademacher previously served nine years as a public defender in Buffalo County. His leadership includes service on the Nebraska County Judges Association Executive Committee and participation in statewide committees on judicial education, caseload, and redistricting. In 2021, he was named a Nebraska State Bar Foundation Fellow.



The Honorable Michael P. Burns has served on the Adams County Court since 2011 and is the Senior County Court Judge for Nebraska's 10th Judicial District. He began practicing law in 1992 and has worked as a county attorney in both Washington State and Hall County, as well as a public defender in Clay County. Judge Burns is a longtime advocate for children and families, serving on the Nebraska Supreme Court Commission on Children in the Courts and the Governor's Commission for the Protection of Children.

The Honorable Joel B. Jay has presided over Lincoln County Court since 2019. Prior to his appointment, he practiced law in Kansas and Colorado, and served as the Chappell City Attorney and Deuel County Attorney. He has a strong record of civic involvement, including board service with the Chappell Community Fund, Volunteers of America, and the Creek Valley School District Board of Education.

