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MAN HIKES ENTIRE LENGTH OF APPALACHIAN TRAIL TO RAISE AWARENESS OF CHILDREN LIVING IN FOSTER CARE

SOMERS POINT, N.J.: Beginning April 5, Steve Russell, an attorney formerly with the Florida Guardian ad Litem (GAL) office in Clearwater, Fla. will begin a 2,178 mile Appalachian Trail foot journey in Georgia with his two rescued dogs. He hopes to raise awareness of the 700,000 children living in foster care across the country and the GAL and Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) volunteers who speak on their behalf. Russell will end his trek seven months later in Maine on November 8 hopeful that his challenges along the Trail will bring to light the hardships that foster children face every day.

“If you gathered the over 700,000 children who have been abused, neglected or abandoned by their parents across the country at any given time, including the 700 in Atlantic and Cape May Counties, N.J., they exceed the population of cities like Seattle, Las Vegas, Atlanta or Denver,” says Angela Waters Executive Director of CASA of Atlantic and Cape May Counties. “Every one of those children needs a volunteer to advocate on their behalf in court. Unfortunately, we have more children than volunteers. That is why CASA of Atlantic and Cape May Counties is supporting Russell’s Canines 4 Kids, Inc. Appalachian Trail Hike.”

“Child court advocacy organizations across the country, like CASA of Atlantic and Cape May Counties, are doing a terrific job advocating on behalf of the children and are doing so in the face of staff cut-backs and shrinking budgets. But they just don’t have enough volunteers,” says Russell. “The goal of CASA and every child court advocacy office is to have a volunteer assigned to every child in the system. But the public doesn’t realize how big the problem is and so there aren’t enough volunteers to achieve 100 percent coverage – even when some of the volunteers take multiple cases.”

Staff and volunteers from 550 child court advocacy organizations in 30 states have been invited to join Russell and his two dogs, Sandy and Lizzi, along the 2,178 mile hike. “Steve and his dogs are going to hike the entire length of the Appalachian Trail in the course of seven months,” says Executive Director Angela Waters “That allows a lot of offices the opportunity to participate in this joint effort to raise awareness and encourage volunteerism.” Some participants will join Russell on the hike, while others will offer administrative or promotional support. “Unfortunately, Russell’s itinerary brings him to New Jersey right before our Community Breakfast on June 10, so we are supporting his amazing journey by helping to promote it rather than joining in on the hike,” says Waters.

“Thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail is both a mental challenge and a physical challenge,” says Russell. “It is much like what the children in foster care face. For seven months in unfamiliar terrain, we have to carry all our gear, food, clothing and shelter. Foster kids have to carry on with their lives in the face of losing, at least for a time, everything familiar to them - their friends, school, siblings and most of their family relationships and activities. I thought, ‘If my dogs, with the help of GALs and CASAs, could hike the Trail as a metaphor for the kids for whom we advocate in the dependency system, perhaps we could raise the level of public awareness and encourage more volunteers. We’re really grateful that CASA of Atlantic and Cape May Counties is going to support us in this effort. They work very hard for their kids.’ For more information on the hike or to follow the trek visit the website <http://www.facebook.com/canines4kids>.

About CASA

Trained CASA Volunteer Advocates speak on behalf of abused and neglected children in the foster care system and are dedicated to ensuring these children are placed in safe permanent homes as quickly as possible. By matching trained community volunteers with children, CASA ensures that the needs and best interests of these children are met. CASA Volunteer Advocates also can improve the decision-making ability of Family Court judges regarding these children. Volunteering for CASA is a rewarding experience says Volunteer Advocate Judy from New Jersey, “The CASA program addresses one of the most compelling problems of our society, narrows it to one small child and allows me to enter that life and make a difference.” Currently, over 700 children in Atlantic and Cape May Counties Child Welfare Systems who are eligible for CASA services. Last year, CASA served 275 abused and neglected children and helped place 93 children in permanent homes. CASA is a United Way Partner Agency.

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