

CASA Volunteers - Champions for Foster Children

by Janet Ward

You're a busy foster parent (what foster parent isn't!) and the phone rings. "Hi, Mrs. Porter. My name is Judy Vance. I've just been appointed by the court as the CASA volunteer for your foster children, Tim and Maria." What thoughts run through your mind? For many foster parents, the first one is, "What is a CASA?" followed very quickly by, "What is the CASA's role with my foster children?"

The answer to the first question is simple. CASA is an acronym for Court Appointed Special Advocate. A CASA is a trained community volunteer, appointed by the court, to represent the best interests of an abused or neglected child or sibling group. In some locations, a volunteer doing this work is referred to as a *guardian ad litem* or GAL.

The second question is almost easier to answer by cataloging what a CASA volunteer is **not**. CASA volunteers are not attorneys, social workers, transportation aides, Big Brothers or Sisters, therapists or tutors. A CASA volunteer is a child advocate. In order to advocate or speak up for the best interests of a child, the volunteer must get to know the child, so they will spend time together. During that time, the CASA volunteer may perform duties that are sometimes associated with one of the roles above. For example, the volunteer may take time to familiarize the child with the courtroom and the court process to help alleviate fears about an upcoming hearing. The CASA volunteer may ask the child to play catch, read a story, work a puzzle or share a homework assignment. These activities break the ice while at the same time, providing some informal assessment of a child's interests and skills. Similarly, the volunteer may observe visits between the child and biological parents to gather information about that relationship.

It's not surprising that foster parents have questions about CASA. In many areas, little information about the program is provided during foster parent training. There are several reasons for this. CASA is not available in every jurisdiction. Even in those communities that have a program, there are rarely enough volunteers to go around. CASA volunteers are currently serving only about 51% of the children in need nationally. Another reason is that CASA programs are not identical. While there are standards for CASA programs, each is a grassroots effort that bears the stamp of the community in which it developed. State statutes, administrative structure, model of representation and judicial practices all influence the way a local program operates. These differences make it difficult to create a "universal" piece of training that covers all the bases.

That being said, there are many areas of common ground. In all CASA programs, volunteers must undergo rigorous screening and training. In each case, they are appointed by a judge and have court-ordered access to the child, relevant documents and persons such as foster parents that they will need to contact. CASA volunteers are supervised by professional staff and bound by rules of confidentiality.

The four key components of the volunteer role include:

- **Information Gathering/Investigation**

Carrying out an objective, systematic examination of the situation, including relevant history, environment, relationships, and needs of the child. This includes reviewing records, interviewing appropriate people involved in the child's life and maintaining regular contact with the child. It does **not** mean “re-investigating” the conditions that brought the child into care but, instead, making a careful and thorough assessment of the child’s current circumstances and the plan for his/her future. Foster parents, with their in-depth knowledge of the child, are critical to this information-gathering process.

- **Facilitation**

Identifying resources and services for the child and facilitating a collaborative relationship between all parties to the case; helping to create a situation in which the child's needs can be met. While **CASA volunteers do not provide direct services**, they can be powerful allies of foster parents in locating appropriate services for children in their home and persuading agencies to provide them in a timely manner.

- **Advocacy**

Speaking up for and pleading the case of the child in court proceedings as well as other venues: with social workers, school personnel, therapists, etc. To the extent possible, making sure all actions taken are "in the best interests of the child", remembering that the ultimate goal for every child is a safe permanent home in the shortest possible time. Depending on the model, this may mean that the volunteer submits a written report to the court, testifies in the case or both.

Volunteers do not assume the role of attorneys. In some cases, the child may have an attorney to represent his/her wishes as well as a CASA volunteer to represent the child’s best interests.

- **Monitoring**

Keeping track of whether the orders of the court and the plans of the social services agency are being carried out by parents, social services and other parties. If collaborative efforts to encourage follow-through are unsuccessful, reporting the difficulties to the court as soon as possible.

As foster parents know, juvenile court judges must make life-altering decisions about children in less time than it takes to pick up a prescription or drop off a video. CASA volunteers help fill the court’s need for the best information possible. The volunteer is often the only “continuous thread” in a case that spans several years. A judge, reading a CASA report, sees that the volunteer has spent considerable time getting to know the child **and** the facts of the case and may be the only person in the courtroom able to do both. The court is also aware that the volunteer has a single focus - to advocate for the best interests of the child – and is not saddled with the high caseload, budget shortfalls or personal involvement that can adversely affect the participation of other parties. For these reasons, judges pay close attention to CASA reports and recommendations, even though they are not binding on the court. The information provided by

the volunteer is only a portion of the evidence and does not determine the outcome of the case. That remains within the discretion of the judge.

How can you, as a foster parent, help your foster child reap the greatest benefit from having a CASA volunteer? Here are a few suggestions.

- a) Prepare your foster child for the volunteer's first visit. Explain simply and briefly that the judge in their case has asked this person to come and talk to them since the judge can't visit all the children that he/she has to make decisions about. Encourage them to be open.
- b) Share information initially and as the case progresses. Treat the CASA volunteer as a teammate in the effort to meet your foster child's needs. Use your judgement about how best to convey sensitive information. Sometimes, it will be more appropriate to talk to the volunteer without the child present. Due to confidentiality restrictions, the CASA volunteer may not be able to share with you as freely as you both might like but he/she can make sure your concerns are heard.
- c) Let the volunteer know what works for you and the child as far as timing and location of visits. Have the child ready at scheduled times. Some CASA volunteers will visit at the foster home and some will take the child out. If the visit will be in your home, have some space available where the pair can talk relatively privately.

As a foster parent, you are frequently asked to integrate yet another figure into the life and care of your foster children. Sometimes, you wonder if it's worth the effort. Thousands of children in the system who have found safe permanent homes sooner with help of CASA volunteer would answer with a resounding yes.

If you would like to learn more about CASA or find out whether there is a CASA or GAL program in your area, please visit our website, www.casenet.org.

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