

## CASA FAQs

### FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

**What is a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)?** A CASA is an everyday hero—a community volunteer appointed as an officer of the court to advocate for a specific child in the foster or social services system. CASAs are appointed by a Juvenile Court Judge to represent the best interest of specific abused or neglected children in court proceedings.

#### **How do I become a CASA?**

Requirements include attending a General Information Session, submitting an application, passing a criminal background check, interviewing with CASA staff and going through the Pre-Service Training. Upon successful completion, a Juvenile Court Judge will swear you in as a CASA volunteer and officer of the court.

**What does a CASA do?** A trained CASA spends time with the child and gathers information for the court. He or she recommends to the judge what the child needs to be safe and what is in the child's best interest for a safe, nurturing and permanent home. A CASA volunteer advocates for an appropriate decision that is made in a timely manner.

#### **What is the time requirement for being a CASA volunteer Advocate?**

Volunteer Advocates devote an average of five to 15 hours per month to case activities, including visiting with the child; participating in meetings and court hearings; communicating with professionals, family members and caregivers; and documenting visits and advocacy progress. Court appearances and some case activities (e.g., making contact with caseworkers, teachers, therapists, etc.) requires availability during regular workweek hours. Court hearings are scheduled weeks or months in advance, which helps with planning.

#### **How long are CASA volunteers involved with their CASA child?**

Ideally, the CASA remains with the child until his or her case is closed. We ask volunteers to make a minimum two year commitment. One of the primary benefits for a child with a CASA is having a consistent adult presence in the child's life—sometimes the *only* consistent, stable adult presence.

#### **How many cases does a CASA manage?**

Generally, CASAs manage only one case at a time. However, a case can involve more than one child (sibling groups) from the same family.

#### **Does a CASA need legal knowledge or expertise?**

No. CASAs are valuable because they come from all walks of life and can draw on a variety of professional and personal experiences. Most importantly, they are responsible, caring adults with good common sense. However, while you may initially have little legal knowledge, you'll learn a lot about the legal process and Juvenile Court System through your CASA volunteer training and experience.

**Why does a child need a CASA?** When the court is making decisions that will affect a child's future, the child needs and deserves a spokesperson—an objective adult to provide independent information about the child's best interests. While other parties in the case are concerned about the child, they also represent other interests. The CASA is the only person in the case whose sole concern is the best interest of the child. CASAs are assigned one case at a time—one CASA per each (or sibling group) to provide that child with a "voice in court."

**How is a CASA different than a social worker?** The CASA role is independent from the social services system and focuses solely on the child. The Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) caseworkers serve the entire family—parents and child—by providing direct services. DCFS caseworkers are not able to be a wholly independent voice because they are part of an agency that has already taken a position in the case by filing a petition and bringing the matter to court. Conversely, a CASA is an independent voice, advocating on behalf of one particular child. Generally, a social worker is employed by state or local governments and can have dozens of cases at one time, making a comprehensive investigation of each case a challenge. The CASA, however, is assigned specifically to a child or sibling group and can devote more time to his or her assigned case. The CASA does not replace a social worker; he or she is an independent appointee of the court. The CASA thoroughly examines a child's case, investigates various community resources and makes recommendations to the court.

**Why does a child need a CASA and an attorney?** Serving at the request of a judge and providing reports on the best placement for a child, CASAs can spend as much time as is necessary to gather information about the child and the child's familial system. Paying an attorney to do this job would be cost-prohibitive. A child's attorney provides legal representation. The CASA and attorney can work as a team to represent the best interest of the child.

**Why does CASA of the Tenth need funding when volunteers are unpaid?** We hire staff to manage the program and supervise volunteers. Program costs include: salaries, office support, computers and equipment, travel, recruitment and training. CASA staff members recruit, train and supervise volunteers to ensure quality services. All operations and activities are designed to meet National CASA program standards.

**Does the court listen to what a CASA has to say?** Judges know their decisions are only as good as the information they receive. So, yes, they count on the CASA's independent voice, recognizing that the CASA has more time to focus on specific cases. A CASA who can tell the court "I was there; this is what I observed," is invaluable.

**How do we know CASAs are effective?** Studies have shown CASAs help reduce court costs, stays in foster care and even delinquency rates. A study conducted by the National CASA Association showed that children with a CASA spent approximately eight fewer months in foster care than children without a CASA. This not only means that a child finds a permanent and safe home more quickly, but reflects a significant savings to taxpayers.

### **What does the background check entail?**

We thoroughly screen all applicants for the CASA volunteer Advocate position, including

- CANTS (Child Abuse and Neglect Tracking System)
- LEADS (Law Enforcement Detailed Summary)
- Fingerprints (submitted to the FBI)
- National Sex Offender Registry
- A valid Driver's License or government-issued identification
- Verification of social security number

### **Does the CASA role require travel?**

Local travel is necessary, as the duties of a CASA include monthly, face-to-face contact with the child wherever he or she resides, plus required court hearings a few times per year. You may also need to travel to gather information from other parties related to the case.

### **What kind of support can CASAs expect?**

Each CASA is assigned an Advocate Supervisor, and has access to continuing ed training and materials through CASA of the Tenth office and staff. Other activities, such as social get-togethers help connect volunteers with each other to discuss common issues.

### **Can I introduce my CASA child to my family?**

CASAs are not allowed to take their CASA child on family outings or invite them to visit their home, as this can often lead to confusion for the child about the relationship. Additionally, in most cases, family members have not gone through CASA training and are not held to the same confidentiality parameters, which would cause a breach of confidentiality.

### **How old are CASA children?**

The young people served by CASA of the Tenth range in age from infant to age 21.

### **How much notice do CASAs get on court dates?**

A CASA will be informed of his or her next court date at the conclusion of the current hearing, usually six months in advance. The CASA office will also remind CASAs of their court dates a few weeks prior.

### **What if I'm unable to attend a court date?**

While attendance at court hearings is a required duty of a CASA volunteer Advocate, we understand that emergencies may arise that prevent attendance. If you cannot attend, contact your Advocate Supervisor immediately, as he or she may attend in your place.