



## CASA VOLUNTEER OVERVIEW

### INTRODUCTION

A CASA is an official part of judicial proceedings, working alongside attorneys and foster care case managers. By handling only one case at a time, the CASA has time to thoroughly explore the history of each assigned case. The CASA role is comprised of advocating, investigating, facilitating, and monitoring. This is accomplished by talking to the child, parents, family members, neighbors, school officials, doctors, and others involved in the child's life or family's life at some point who might have facts about the case. The volunteer reviews all court facts and documents pertaining to the case. The CASA helps to facilitate a collaborative relationship between all parties on the case. For every scheduled court hearing, he/she submits a written report to the Judge that includes recommendations with regard to the best interest of the child/children. The CASA continues involvement with the child/children in the case to assure that the judicial and child welfare systems are moving ahead to secure a safe, permanent home for the child/children, and that court-ordered services are provided to them and the family. Each volunteer appointed to a case is assigned to one of the program's advocate supervisors to assure consistency in volunteer activities and to provide a resource and guide in the complexity of child welfare proceedings.

### HISTORY

Judge David Soukup of Seattle, Washington first implemented the CASA concept in 1977. As a Judge, he felt a compelling need to have more information available to him on which he could base his decisions, most of which had lifetime ramifications for children. Kent County's late Judge John P. Steketee was part of the group of then Juvenile Court Judges who named and initiated the program. "Last year more than 76,000 CASA and guardian ad litem (GAL) volunteers helped more than 251,000 abused and neglected children find safe, permanent homes. CASA/GAL volunteers are everyday citizens who have undergone screening and training with their local CASA/GAL program. The National CASA Association has been established to provide leadership and lend technical support to new and existing programs. The Kent County CASA Program, which began in 1991 as a court-based program but became a 501(c) 3 nonprofit in 2005, adheres to the program guidelines and standards established by the National CASA Association.

### QUALIFICATIONS

CASA volunteers must be of majority age (21 years) and successfully complete screening requirements, including a written application with references, a personal interview, and a criminal background investigation. In addition, volunteers will complete 30+ hours of training and be sworn in by the family court judges. Volunteers must have their own transportation and provide proof of current auto insurance.

### REQUIRED SKILLS/ABILITIES

- ❖ Ability to keep all client and court information confidential.
- ❖ Ability to respect and relate to people from various backgrounds (economic, cultural, educational) in a variety of settings.
- ❖ Ability and resources to transport self to a variety of locations, including surrounding Kent County.
- ❖ Ability to maintain objectivity in emotional situations.
- ❖ Ability to gather and record factual information accurately.
- ❖ Ability to deal with hostility, anger, and other emotional attitudes.
- ❖ Ability to be a team player with all parties involved in a case.

### TIME COMMITMENT

- ❖ Once assigned to a case, CASA volunteers are required to commit themselves to that case until the case is discharged from the legal system (average case length is 18 months, though this is not typical).
- ❖ CASA volunteers are expected to devote an average of 10 to 20 hours per month to their work on a case.
- ❖ As a part of the required monthly hours, a volunteer is to see the child/children he/she is assigned to a minimum of three times per month.

## WHAT EXACTLY DOES A CASA VOLUNTEER DO?

CASA volunteers are appointed by judges to advocate for the best interests of abused and neglected children in court and other settings. The primary responsibilities of a CASA volunteer are to:

- ❖ **Gather information.** Review documents and records; interview the children, family members, and professionals in their lives.
- ❖ **Document findings.** Provide written reports at court hearings.
- ❖ **Appear in court.** Advocate for the child's best interests and provide testimony when necessary.
- ❖ **Explain what is going on.** Help the child understand the court proceedings.
- ❖ **"Be the glue."** Seek cooperative solutions among individuals and organizations involved in the children's lives. As one volunteer said: Be the glue that connects the pieces in a complicated child welfare system.
- ❖ **Recommend services.** Ensure that the children and their family are receiving appropriate services, and advocate for those that are not immediately available. Bring concerns about the child's health, education, mental health, etc. to the appropriate professionals.
- ❖ **Monitor case plans and court orders.** Check to see that plans are being followed and mandated review hearings are being held.
- ❖ **Keep the court informed.** Update the court on developments with agencies and family members. Ensure that appropriate motions are filed on behalf of the child so the court knows about any changes in the child's situation.

## KENT COUNTY STATISTICS

- ❖ The Kent County CASA Program began in 1991 as a Court-based program, training its first group of volunteers in 1992. The program is now a non-profit agency known as CASA of Kent County, Inc.
- ❖ Kent County CASA volunteers advocate for children from birth to 18 years of age for children who have been removed from their homes due to abuse & neglect becoming wards of the court.
- ❖ Children who become wards of the court may linger in the system for months, even years; a typical child will remain in foster care for 18 months to 2 years.
- ❖ In 2015, there were 1,059 children in Kent County who were eligible for CASA services.
- ❖ In that same year, 96 CASA volunteers advocated for a total of 197 Kent County children in the Courts. Fifty-eight (58) children achieved permanency – either returned safely to their homes or were placed in a safe, stable and loving adoptive home.
- ❖ CASA of Kent County's ultimate goal is to serve every child who needs a CASA volunteer; however, the current deficit of volunteers prevents the program from reaching this goal. Because there are not enough CASA volunteers to represent all of the children in care, judges typically assign CASA volunteers to their most difficult cases
- ❖ There is always a need for male volunteers, people of color, and bilingual individuals to become CASA volunteers.

## NATIONAL STATISTICS

- ❖ In 2013, an estimated 3.5 million children were reported abused or neglected. Of this number, 678,932 reports of child abuse were substantiated. This represents approximately 9.1 out of every 1,000 children in the United States.
- ❖ From October 1, 2012, through September 30, 2013, an estimated 1,520 children died from abuse or neglect. Children 0-3 years old accounted for 73.9% of child fatalities. Children younger than 1 year old accounted for 46.5% of child fatalities.
- ❖ Violence occurs against women and children in the same family. Research indicates that between 50 and 70 percent of men who assault their female partners also abuse their children.
- ❖ In 2013, an estimated 641,000 children were in foster care. They spent a median of 21.8 months in foster care.
- ❖ On September 30, 2013, there were 101,840 children waiting to be adopted. Only 50,608 children were adopted from the public foster care system between October 1, 2012, and September 30, 2013.
- ❖ Children who suffer abuse or neglect are 53% more likely to become juvenile delinquents, 38% more likely to be arrested as adults, and 38% more likely to become violent criminals. Furthermore, abused and neglected children are involved in delinquency and criminal activity earlier, commit more offenses, and more often become chronic or repeat offenders. Abused children also have lower IQs, lower reading ability, higher rates of unemployment, more low-paying jobs, and higher rates of suicide attempts.