



## What is CASA?

In 2010, more than 700,000 children in the United States were confirmed victims of abuse and neglect. Some are victims of violence, psychological torment or sexual abuse. Others have been neglected or even abandoned by their own parents. Most of them are frightened and confused. Often these children also become victims of this country's overburdened child welfare system – a complex legal network of lawyers, social workers, and judges who frequently are too overburdened to give thorough, detailed attention to each child who comes before them.

The consequences can be severe.

A nine-year-old boy is discovered in a Kentucky foster home so malnourished he weighs only 17 pounds. A child dies in a state-licensed "temporary care" shelter, where seven children had been sharing one bedroom for more than a year. An 18-year-old boy moves out of his seventh New York foster home, unable to read, write or care for himself as an adult.

These are just three of thousands of children who will never know what it is like to have a permanent home – with their formative years "lost" in temporary care while the court decides their fate.

## The Cost of Abuse and Neglect

The annual cost of child abuse and neglect to taxpayers is over \$24 billion, but the cost in human potential is even greater, reaching almost \$70 billion in indirect costs. Studies show there is a very good chance many of the children will end up juvenile delinquents or adult criminals.

Enter the CASA concept. The Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program was created in 1977 to ensure that the abuse and neglect that these children originally suffered at home does not continue as abuse and neglect at the hands of the system.

A CASA volunteer is a trained community volunteer appointed by a juvenile or family court judge to speak for the best interest of children who are brought before the court. The majority of a CASA volunteer's assignments are home placement cases where an abused and neglected child has been removed for protection from the care of his/her parents.

## Who Can Be a CASA Volunteer?

CASA volunteers are ordinary citizens. No special or legal background is required. Volunteers are screened closely for objectivity, competence and commitment.

## CASA Volunteer Training

CASA volunteers undergo a thorough training course conducted by the local CASA program. Training requirements vary from program to program, but an average course is approximately 30 hours. Volunteers learn about courtroom procedure from the principals in the system – from judges, lawyers, social workers, court personnel and others. CASA volunteers also learn effective advocacy techniques for children, and are educated about specific topics

ranging from child sexual abuse to early childhood development and adolescent behavior.

## Three Roles of a Volunteer

As a child advocate, the CASA volunteer has three main responsibilities:

1. Serving as a fact-finder for the judge by thoroughly researching the background of each assigned case
2. Speaking for the child in the courtroom; representing the child's best interests
3. Acting as a "watchdog" for the child during the life of the case ensuring that it is brought to a swift and appropriate conclusion

## Based on a Child's Rights

The CASA concept is based on the belief that every child has the right to a safe, permanent home. In court jurisdictions that have adopted the program, the juvenile or family court judge turns to a specially trained pool of CASA volunteers each time a case involving a child is received. The judge appoints a volunteer to the child's case who becomes an official part of the judicial proceedings, working alongside attorneys and social workers as appointed officer of the court. Unlike attorneys and social workers, however, the CASA volunteer speaks exclusively for the child's best interests.

By handling only one or two cases at a time (compared to a social agency caseworker's average load of 60-90), the CASA volunteer has the time to explore thoroughly the history of each assigned case. The volunteer talks with the child, parents and family members, neighbors, school officials, doctors and others involved in the child's background who might have facts about the case. The volunteer reviews all records and documents pertaining to the child and then submits a formal report to the court recommending placement: should the child stay with his/her parents, be placed in foster care, or be freed for permanent adoption. If the court leaves the child in temporary care, the CASA volunteer provides continuity by staying with a case until it is permanently resolved.

Since its creation in 1977, CASA has had a dramatic impact on the nation's system. There are now over 1,015 CASA programs across the country including Washington, D.C. and the U.S. Virgin Islands. New Programs start up at a rate of two per month. Research shows these programs utilize over 70,900 volunteers who advocate for the best interests of America's abused and neglected children. As a result of their work, these children have a better chance of finding a safe, permanent home and hope for the future. In 2010, volunteers helped over 240,000 children.

Local CASA programs vary in size and scope from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Programs often differ from one another with varying operating methods and sources of funding. In all states, the CASA volunteer is a monitor, providing research and background, and following through on each case to see that the court's recommendations are carried out. In some states, the CASA volunteer is a full party to court proceedings to the extent that he or she may call witnesses and solicit testimony through the services of an attorney.

CASA is known at the local level by a variety of names. In San Diego, CA, the program is called Voices for Children; in Cincinnati, OH, it's ProKids. One of the largest CASA programs in the nation is the Florida Guardian ad Litem program, managed by state government.

The National CASA Association, based in Seattle, WA, was established in 1982 to provide a national focus for individual CASA programs, promote the CASA concept, provide technical assistance to new CASA/GAL programs, and support with volunteer recruitment, fundraising and public awareness outreach.

For additional information contact:

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*"The National CASA Association has my deepest admiration and support. CASA and GAL volunteers play a critical role in making sure that abused and neglected children get the care and services they need. It is a great way for the community to make a positive impact on the vulnerable lives of the children."*

John Ashcroft  
Former Attorney General  
U.S. Department of Justice

*"As Chairman of the National Commission on Children, I have observed judges in juvenile courts with a mere 10 to 15 minutes to decide whether a child should remain in a distressed family or be placed in foster care. With growing caseloads, it is increasingly difficult for the courts and social workers to make the system work for families and children. This is why CASA volunteers are so essential. They provide valuable information and insight about individual children. CASA deserves our deep admiration and support."*

U.S. Senator John D. Rockefeller, IV

*"Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteers play a unique role on behalf of some of our most vulnerable children. They often stand alone for abused and neglected children. Their commitment, vigilance, and persistence offer hope where there has been little. They help light the way for these children – and for all of us."*

Marian Wright Edelman  
Founder and President,  
Children's Defense Fund

*"The lawyers know the statutes; the social workers know the regulations. But the CASA volunteer is assigned to understand the child, one child at a time, to understand the boundaries of her life, to consider her hopes and dreams, to try to come to some conclusion about what will be in her best interests. For children whose pasts have been chaotic and whose futures are uncertain, the CASA volunteer may be the most consistent interested presence in their lives."*

Anna Quindlen  
Pulitzer Prize winning author and journalist