



CASA VOLUNTEER OVERVIEW

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of Kent County

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. "Caseworkers have obligations to their agency, the parent and others. Lawyers cannot investigate the facts and advocate for the mental health and social needs of the child. As a Judge for a general jurisdiction, I was trying civil cases, often involving large amounts of money or important legal issues. I would do the best job I could in deciding those cases and leave them at the courthouse when I went home. I wouldn't wake up at 4 a.m. worrying about my decision. While sitting at juvenile court, I never got a night's sleep without waking to wonder if at least one decision I made that day had been the best for a child.

It struck me that it might be possible to recruit and train volunteers to investigate a child's case so they could provide a voice for the child in those proceedings, proceedings which could affect their whole lives. I had my bailiff call four or five people in the community who might be resources in recruiting volunteers to ask if they would meet for a brown bag lunch at juvenile court to discuss the idea. There were 50 people in the room when I walked in for that lunch. I thought, "This idea is going to work." Judge David Soukup, Retired. It has. Tens of thousands of people like you, speaking up for hundreds of thousands of children, have proven that it does.

CASA Kent County, Inc. was founded in 1992 by the, then Juveniles Judges, including the late Judge John P. Stekete and the Honorable Judge Nanaruth Carpenter. They believed they needed to be armed with as much information as possible to help them determine the disposition of cases involving children made wards of the court because of familial abuse or neglect. And like other courtrooms across the country, they turned to CASA Volunteers to provide them with as much knowledge and information they could get their hands on to make life altering and very difficult decisions for foster children. Court Appointed Special Advocates are specially trained volunteers charged with investigating the facts of their one case, facilitating meetings and ensuring resources are provided to the one child or sibling group for whom they advocate, monitoring the progress of the parents, and advocating for what they feel is in their CASA child's best interest in court. CASA Volunteers are their CASA child's voice in court. When the plethora of professionals involved in the lives of foster children are too busy to focus on just one child at a time, a CASA Volunteer does.

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.