

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)?

A CASA volunteer advocates for children who are involved in the juvenile court system as a result of abuse and/or neglect. Volunteers investigate, negotiate, monitor and advocate for the best interest of the child. CASAs advise the St. Joseph Probate Court by testifying at court hearings and by submitting thorough written reports. The reports include a factual history as well as recommendations for the child's case plan, including placement and treatment. The program has standing to file appropriate legal motions and request hearings on behalf of the child. CASAs participate in case conferences with the St. Joseph County Department of Child Services.

Indiana law requires the appointment of either a Guardian Ad Litem (GAL) or a trained Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) in abuse and neglect cases under certain circumstances and provides for discretionary appointment in others. If a child is alleged to be a Child In Need of Services (CHINS) because he presents a risk to himself or others, is born with drugs or alcohol in his system or is at-risk as a result of pre-natal substance abuse, is not receiving appropriate medical care or the whereabouts of his parent is unknown, the court should appoint a Guardian Ad Litem or CASA. The Court has the discretion to appoint a GAL or CASA if the petition alleges other statutory standards for a Child In Need of Services, but shall appoint if the parent, guardian, or custodian of the child denies the allegations of a petition. Moreover, if a child becomes the subject of a petition to terminate the parent/child relationship and the parent objects, the court must appoint a GAL or CASA for the child. In addition to abuse and neglect cases, Indiana law allows for, and some Indiana courts are now appointing CASA volunteers in custody and paternity cases. Although the number of volunteers who provide an invaluable service to Indiana trial courts is remarkable, the need for more volunteers is still unmet.

2.Are CASA Programs Known By Other Names?

Program names within the CASA network include CASA, GAL, FOCAS, Pro-Kids, Voices for Children, Youth Advocacy Commission, Law & Child Protection Project, Child Advocates Youth Services, Children in Placement and Justice System Volunteer Program.

3.What is the CASA volunteer's role?

A CASA volunteer provides a judge with a carefully researched background of the child, which assists the court in making a sound decision about that child's future. Each situation is as unique as the child involved. The CASA volunteer must gather enough information to make recommendations that assist in expediting permanency for the child that he/she serves. The CASA volunteer makes placement and treatment recommendations to the judge and monitors the case until permanency is obtained.

4.How does a CASA volunteer investigate a case?

To prepare a recommendation, the CASA volunteer meets with the child, parents, family members, social workers, school officials, health providers, and others who are knowledgeable about the child's history. The CASA volunteer also reviews all records pertaining to the child: school, medical, Department of Child Services (DCS), and other documents.

5.How does a CASA volunteer differ from a Department of Child Services Family Case Manager?

The Family Case Manager is employed by the state. They sometimes work on as many as 60 cases at one time, and are frequently unable to conduct a comprehensive investigation of each. A CASA volunteer has more time and a smaller caseload. The CASA volunteer does not replace a Family Case Manager; he or she is independently appointed by the court. The CASA volunteer can thoroughly examine a child's case, has knowledge of community resources, and can make recommendations to the court, independent of DCS's policies / guidelines.

6. How does the role of a CASA volunteer differ from an attorney?

The CASA volunteer does not provide legal representation in the courtroom; that is the role of the attorney. However, the CASA volunteer does provide critical background information that assists attorneys in presenting their cases.

7. Who is the "typical" CASA volunteer?

CASA volunteers come from all walks of life, with a variety of professional, educational, and ethnic backgrounds. There are more than 60,000 CASA volunteers advocating for 240,000 children in the United States.

8. Can anyone be a CASA volunteer?

Specialized background is not required. Volunteers are screened closely for objectivity, competence, and commitment. Indiana statute requires that volunteers be 21 years of age and locally, the ability to pass a background check and drug screen are also required to become a CASA volunteer.

9. What training does a CASA volunteer receive?

CASA volunteers undergo a thorough training process conducted by the local CASA program. Locally, volunteers receive 35 hours of training offered by a variety of professionals who contribute their training services to the program. Training topics include: Introduction to the Child Welfare System, Juvenile Court System, Child Development, Cultural Competence, Effective Communication, Sexual Victimization and Perpetration, and an ongoing emphasis on the roles and responsibilities of the CASA volunteer. Additionally, the local program follows the National CASA Association Volunteer Training Curriculum.

10. How does the CASA volunteer relate to the child he or she represents?

CASA volunteers offer children trust, stability, and reliability during complex legal proceedings. CASA volunteers also encourage the child to express his or her own opinions and hopes.

11.How many cases on average does a CASA volunteer carry at a time?

The number varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, but an average caseload is one to two cases. This allows the CASA to devote enough time and attention necessary to expedite permanency for each child that is served.

12.Do lawyers, judges, and social workers support CASA?

Juvenile and family court judges support the CASA program in their courtroom and appoint the volunteers. CASA has been endorsed by the American Bar Association, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, and the National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators. CASA is a priority project of the Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The office encourages the establishment of new CASA programs, assists established CASA programs and provides partial funding for the National CASA Association.

13.How many CASA Programs are there nationally?

There are now 1,018 CASA programs operating across the country, including the District of Columbia and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

14.How effective are CASA Programs?

The US Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General indicates that once a CASA volunteer is assigned, approximately 95% of children do not languish in long-term foster care and 90% of children do not reenter the child welfare system. Cases assigned to a CASA volunteer tend to involve the most serious cases of maltreatment, in which the children were more at risk. Furthermore, when a CASA volunteer was involved, both children and their parents were ordered by the courts to receive more services.

15.How much time does a case require?

Each case is different. A CASA volunteer initially spends about 10-15 hours per month doing research and conducting interviews prior to the first court appearance. More complicated cases require more time. Once acclimated to their particular case, less time is required to maintain contacts and attend court hearings.

16. How long does a CASA volunteer remain involved with a case?

The volunteer continues until permanency is achieved. This is a primary benefit to the child because the CASA remains the consistent figure throughout the life of the case and provides continuity for the child.

17. Are there any other agencies or groups which provide the same service?

No. There are other child advocacy organizations, but CASA is the only program through which volunteers are appointed by a judge to represent a child's best interest in court.

18. What is the role of the National CASA Association?

The National CASA Association is a non-profit organization that represents and serves the local CASA programs. It provides training, technical assistance, research, news, and public awareness services to its members.

19. How is the program regarded locally?

"CASA volunteers serve as the eyes and ears of the Court. They are to be commended for their interest and dedication in advocating for children. Protecting the best interest of the child is the overriding concern of every CASA volunteer." (Hon. Peter J. Nemeth, Judge, St. Joseph Probate Court) "The CASAs services are very much needed for the welfare of these children. Thank you for your dedication to these children. I can certainly understand why you want the CASA back in St. Joseph County to be reassigned to another family. She has done an outstanding job and certainly has the children's interest at heart." (Hon. Michael D. Cook, Former Judge, Marshall Circuit Court) Local Facts: During 2020, 895 children were served by 157 volunteers who contributed tens of thousands of hours. Locally, the CASA Program of St. Joseph County is administered by the St. Joseph Probate Court.