



## CASA FACT SHEET

### **WHAT IS CASA?**

A Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteer is a trained citizen who is appointed by a judge to represent the best interest of a child in court. Children helped by CASA volunteers include those for whom home placement is being determined in youth court. All of the children are victims of abuse and/or neglect.

### **WHAT IS THE CASA VOLUNTEER'S ROLE?**

A CASA volunteer provides a judge with a carefully researched background of the child to help the court make a sound decision about the child's future. Each home placement case is as unique as the child involved. The CASA volunteer must determine if it is in a child's best interest to stay with his or her parents or guardians, be placed in foster care, or be freed for permanent adoption. The CASA volunteer makes a recommendation on placement to the judge and follows through on the case until it is permanently resolved.

### **HOW DOES A CASA VOLUNTEER INVESTIGATE A CASE?**

To prepare a recommendation, the CASA volunteer talks with the child, parents, family members, social worker, 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 and case worker reports, and other documents.

### **HOW DOES A CASA VOLUNTEER DIFFER FROM A SOCIAL SERVICE CASEWORKER?**

Social workers generally are employed by state governments. The CASA worker is a volunteer with more time and a smaller caseload (an average of 2-3 cases at a time). The CASA volunteer does not replace a social worker on a case; rather he or she is an independent appointee of 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 state agency restriction.

### **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 crucial background information that assists attorneys in presenting their cases. It is important to remember that CASA volunteers do not represent a child's wishes in court; rather, they speak to the child's best interests.

### **IS THERE A "TYPICAL" CASA VOLUNTEER?**

CASA volunteers come from all walks of life, with a variety of professional, educational, and ethnic backgrounds. There are more than 76,000 CASA volunteers nationally in over 900 programs helping more than 251,000 abused and neglected children find safe, permanent homes. Since the inception of CASA advocacy, volunteers have helped well over 2,000,000 children find safe, permanent homes in which they can thrive.

### **CAN ANYONE VOLUNTEER TO BE A CASA?**

CASA volunteers are ordinary citizens who must be at least 21 years of age, successfully pass screening requirements that include criminal background and child abuse registry checks. No special or legal background is required. Volunteers are screened closely for objectivity, competence and commitment.

**WHAT TRAINING DOES A CASA VOLUNTEER RECEIVE?** CASA volunteers must complete a thorough training course consisting of at least 30 hours of classroom instruction and court observation. The course is based on the National CASA Association curriculum that is tailored to the needs of the local county. 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 seminars on child sexual abuse to discussions on early childhood development and adolescent behavior.

### **HOW DOES THE CASA VOLUNTEER RELATE TO THE CHILD WHOM HE OR SHE REPRESENTS?**

CASA volunteers offer children trust and advocacy during complex legal proceedings. They explain to the child the events that are happening, the reasons they are in court, and the roles the judge, lawyers, and social workers play. CASA volunteers, while remaining objective observers, also encourage the child to express his or her own opinions and hopes.

### **HOW MANY CASES ON THE AVERAGE DOES A CASA VOLUNTEER CARRY AT A TIME?**

The number varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, but an average caseload is two or three.

### **DO LAWYERS, JUDGES AND SOCIAL WORKERS SUPPORT CASA?**

Yes. Juvenile and family court judges implement the CASA program in their courtrooms 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.

### **DOES THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT SUPPORT CASA?**

CASA is a priority project of the Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The OJJDP encourages the establishment of new CASA programs, assists in establishing CASA programs, and provides partial funding for the National CASA Association.

### **DOES THE STATE GOVERNMENT SUPPORT CASA?**

The 1994 Legislature passed a concurrent resolution supporting CASA programs in Mississippi. CASA is also endorsed by the Mississippi Bar Association.

### **HOW EFFECTIVE HAVE CASA PROGRAMS BEEN?**

Preliminary findings show that children who have been assigned CASA volunteers tend to spend less time in court and less time within the foster-care system. CASA children also have better chances of finding permanent homes than non-CASA children.

### **HOW MUCH TIME DOES IT REQUIRE?**

Each case is different. A CASA volunteer usually spends about 10 hours doing research and conducting interviews prior to the first court appearance. More complicated cases take longer. Once initiated into the system, volunteers donate about 10 hours a month.

### **HOW LONG DOES A CASA VOLUNTEER REMAIN INVOLVED WITH A CASE?**

The volunteer continues until the case is permanently resolved. One of the primary benefits of the CASA program is that, unlike other court principals who often rotate cases, the CASA volunteer is a consistent figure in the proceedings and provides continuity for a child.

### **ARE THERE ANY OTHER AGENCIES OR GROUPS THAT PROVIDE THE SAME SERVICE?**

No. There are other child advocacy organizations, but CASA is the only program where volunteers are appointed by the court to represent a child's best interests.

### **WHAT CHILDREN ARE ASSIGNED CASA VOLUNTEERS?**

Children who are victims of abuse and neglect who have become wards of the court are assigned CASA volunteers. The program is most common in youth court cases.

### **TO DONATE, BECOME A VOLUNTEER, OR FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:**

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