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The Honorable Jesse Gabriel
Chair, Assembly Budget Committee
1021 O Street, Suite 8230
Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable James Ramos
Chair, Assembly Budget Sub-Committee #6
State Capitol Building, Room 8310
Sacramento, CA 95814

February 22, 2026

RE: CASA Funding – Budget Allocation

Dear Chairs Gabriel and Ramos

The Legislature made Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) for foster children a top priority in allocating \$60,000,000 over the 2022-23, 2023-24, and 2024-25 state budgets to support volunteer advocacy for children who are legal wards of the State. The legislature consistently protected CASA funding despite the Governor recommending the elimination of two-thirds of that allocation in his January 2023 proposed budget, and risks to a cut to the remaining 20,000,000 in the 2024-2025 budget.

\$20 million per year in state funding for CASA programs has been **cut to zero**. This is a funding emergency that endangers the lives of California's children in foster care and ultimately costs taxpayers billions of dollars.

CASA is a lifeline for foster youth. We urge the legislature to continue the investment in youth in foster care by ensuring another \$20,000,000 for CASA in the 2026-2027 budget.

While we know the Legislature and the Governor must make some tough budget decisions, we also are confident that these decisions cannot come at the expense of our most vulnerable children – those living in foster care because of abuse or neglect. Youth in foster care are the most vulnerable of our state's citizens, and we are committed to giving them the services and support they need to thrive. They deserve to be our priority.

These innocent young people are in foster care through no fault of their own. They were removed from their birth families only to endure multiple school and home placement changes; some will never graduate from high school, and statistics show that 1/3 of former foster youth will end up homeless or imprisoned. There is significant long-term impact for them and for taxpayers, including higher health care costs because of unaddressed psychological issues, diminished earning potential because of a lack of education, and a greater likelihood they will be involved in substance abuse or crime. **Conservatively, the annual cost to taxpayers if children and youth do not have this CASA advocacy is as much as \$2 billion a year.**¹

Collectively, there are 44 local CASA programs in the California network who are serving over 12,000 children in foster care – with nearly 9,000 volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocates (“CASAs”) providing advocacy and support. CASA organizations are located in 52 of the 58 counties in California serving areas where 99% of foster children live. CASA is a very cost-efficient nonprofit model powered by highly-trained, dedicated volunteers who work one-on-one with foster

¹ Data from annual National CASA Association survey of California CASA programs; annual CA CASA Impact Reports. Independent Sector Rate for California, 2024: \$38.61/hour X total hours contributed. Incarceration: About 25% of youth aging out of foster care in California are incarcerated within two years (SOH.org); cost per year is approx. \$132,860 (CalMatters). Homelessness: Between 40–50% experience homelessness within 18 months (SOH.org), average 45%; annual cost per person ranges \$30,000–\$50,000 (CA State Auditor), avg \$40,000.

children and are supervised by professionals. CASAs become a child's "voice" and are able to focus on a single child's needs. They are court officers thus providing a comprehensive, balanced view for the judges who are making life-altering decisions for each child's health, education, foster placement, and well-being. According to Harvard's Center on the Developing Child and its ongoing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) research, "*The single most common factor for children who develop resilience is having at least one stable and committed relationship with a parent, caregiver, or other adult.*" A CASA is often the only consistent, dependable, trustworthy adult in a foster child's life. The unique court-appointed role of a CASA enables full access to the child's stakeholders, but is incredibly cost-efficient, with so much of the labor being done by trained volunteers.

CASA is the only organization of its kind serving the children and youth in California's foster care system. These volunteers are recruited, thoroughly trained by local program professionals, and sworn in by Superior Court judges to advocate for foster children in court, in schools, and in the community. No other foster-child-serving charitable organization has the equivalent Court authority, access, and ability to truly change a child's life through court advocacy. As noted, CASA advocacy can save taxpayers as much as \$2 Billion a year that would otherwise be spent on imprisonment, welfare, homelessness, and mental/physical health care for those youth who age out of the foster care system without having any family or support system to help them.

The previous \$60 million appropriation in 2022 enabled California CASA to significantly strengthen the statewide network of 44 local programs to set the stage for growth. This funding allowed CASA programs to serve more than 11,000 foster youth in 2023, or 16.9% of children in need, while creating strategic growth plans to increase future capacity. This included a statewide volunteer recruitment campaign, [Just by Being You](#), which generated 79 million impressions and almost 6,000 volunteer leads resulting in a surge of interest in CASA advocacy. Local CASA programs also benefitted from operational stabilization, reducing staff turnover and building sustainability as well as increasing volunteer retention.

Additional investment is essential, especially now that state funding for CASA programs has been cut to zero. Every state dollar invested expands services for more children, ensuring long-term systemic improvements and breaking the intergenerational cycle of abuse. The strong foundation built through prior investment in CASA is at risk, to the detriment of thousands of foster youth who depend on their local CASA program throughout the state.

Investing in CASA both supports foster youth and creates savings for taxpayers, strengthens workforce development, and reduces societal challenges like homelessness and incarceration. With your help and that of our legislative colleagues in support of a \$20,000,000 allocation, we can envision a safe, stable, successful and positive future for thousands more California foster youth.

I appreciate your consideration of this request. If you have any questions please contact Assemblymember Bonta's Chief of Staff, Haydee Dominguez, at 916-319-2018 or Haydee.dominguez@asm.ca.gov.



MIA BONTA

Assemblymember, 18th District

cc: Jennifer Kim, *Consultant*, Assembly Budget Sub-Committee #6

mtb: hd