**CASA Program… Looking Forward to Summer 2020**

As the Summer 2020 approaches, the CASA Program would like to first begin by reflecting on a few positive thoughts, despite dealing with so many uncertainties during these unprecedented times. We are grateful to those trailblazers, who carried out the vision 40 years ago to establish the CASA Program in Las Vegas, which is known as the Eighth Judicial District Court CASA Program. It was the Judges, Commissioners, Court Administration staff, other community leaders, partnering agencies, and most importantly the brave volunteers who stepped forward to provide a voice for the abused and neglected children, who did not, at the time, have anyone else representing their best interest in the Court. As we embark on our 40th Year Anniversary, we remain very appreciative of all those who continue to support the CASA Program and its mission of representing the best interest of abused and neglected children. Although the 40th Year Anniversary celebration, which was planned for September 2020, has been postponed due to COVID-19 pandemic, the CASA program staff, along with the support of the CASA Foundation and Friends of CASA, will continue exploring other creative ideas that might be available to commemorate this monumental milestone. To our nearly 400 CASA volunteers, we thank you for your unwavering dedication, commitment and most importantly, for the sometimes thankless service that you provide to support the children and families who are in the child welfare system.

While these past three months have been stressful for everyone, primarily due to COVID-19, and most recently due to the nation’s unrest following the unnecessary death of George Floyd of Minneapolis, the CASA staff would like to extend our sincere thoughts to all those families who have lost loved ones, experienced loss of jobs, and may be currently dealing with other physical, financial, social and emotional challenges during these troubling times.

Regarding a few updates, the CASA program, along with the Courts, remains in Phase 2 of the Governor’s Roadmap to Recovery plan. Per the June 2, 2020 Administrative Order from Chief Judge Bell, *“The CASA Program may resume in-person trainings, orientations, and other meetings with members of the public in groups of 50 or less. However, during any of these gatherings, social distancing must be observed and all participants must cover their noses and mouth with face coverings. The CASA Program is encouraged to continue conducting as much business as possible by telephone or other alternative means. Additionally, the Court’s main theme is to continue moving forward, using alternative means as much as possible, social distancing and face coverings.”*

Although most of the CASA staff continue to work remotely, we have remained fully operational and available to support the CASA volunteers and our community partners, through virtual methods. Additionally, our program was able to proudly respond to the increased number of inquiries that were received from individuals who expressed interest in volunteering with our program. As you can imagine, while the CASA staff were ecstatic to have such a large number of inquiries, we were initially feeling a sense of panic, due to limitations we faced in conducting CASA orientations, interviews and training. However, like many of you, we were able to successfully transition to the “virtual world” to continue doing business. We are proud to announce that from the start of the pandemic in March 2020 to June 2020, our program received over **279 inquiries**; conducted over **(50)** one-on-one orientations by phone and nine virtual orientations,with **71 attendees.** We have processed **over (104) applications**, and interviewed **(36).** Thanks to the revisions made to the training curriculum by National CASA/GAL Association, we were able to conduct our first virtual CASA training on June 11, with **19 trainees**. We are also looking forward to conducting our first virtual CASA Night In, (a networking and training forum) on June 24.

As it relates to court hearings, all of the Dependency Judges/Hearing Masters are utilizing Blue Jeans videoconferencing or call in methods for hearings. We are so appreciative of the CASA volunteers who have been submitting their court reports in a timely manner and adjusting to the virtual court hearings, in order to continue advocating on behalf of their CASA children.

But, working in this “virtual world” has been very challenging for some of our CASA volunteers, who really miss interacting face to face with their CASA children.The one most asked question from our CASA volunteers has been, “when can we resume in-person visits with our CASA children?” Likewise, the children are also asking, when can they see their CASA volunteers? Please know that the decision about in-person visits with CASA children cannot be decided solely by the CASA staff, because protocols related to reinstating in-person visits with children in foster care must be developed by DFS Leadership Team, who oversees DFS staff, the legal guardians of the children in care. DFS staff also provides oversight to the families/homes where most of our children are placed. It is our understanding that DFS Leadership Team recently issued an update on their Phase 2 Re-Opening plan, and continue to work on expanding their protocols for in-person visits between parents and children, separated siblings and visits between children and other parties, including therapists, CASAs, Attorneys, etc. The purpose of these protocols is to ensure that visits with children can be facilitated while ensuring and maintaining the social distancing requirements and trying to limit any potential exposure of COVID-19 to children, parents, and foster families.

If you have questions about getting involved with CASA or about other ways that you can help support children in foster care, feel free to contact our office at 702-455-4306, check out our website, or follow us on social media (casalasvegas). We are always looking for passionate and considerate volunteers who want to help “Change a Child’s Story,” from a life of hurt to one of hope.

So, let the summer 2020 begin with us remaining positive, hopeful, encouraged and supportive of each other, as we strive to keep our community and children safe and healthy.

*Warm Regards and Gratitude, Shelia Parks, CASA Program Administrator*