

Advocate Refresher

Staying Motivated in a Challenging Child Welfare System

Being a CASA Volunteer is not for wimps! Advocates spend countless hours fighting for good outcomes for children that have had some sad things happen to them. That in itself takes courage and perseverance! Many times we feel like we are also fighting a system that is supposed to be designed to have the same mission. It can be exhausting and discouraging. Advocate Supervisors share the same frustration and understand how hard it is for you as volunteers to keep fighting. Below are some of the more common dilemmas and some solutions that we have utilized to recharge and keep advocating for the kids we serve:

DCFS will not return your phone calls and you need some information from them:

- Please remember that it is not personal. Caseloads for DCFS workers across the state are very high and they are battling a lack of foster homes and resources for the families they are working with. The workers often have court in multiple parishes each month on top of seeing the children and parents that they are working with.
- When you make contact with them, ask them what their preferred method of corresponding with you is. Some workers will give you their cell phone numbers while others find it easier to email.
- Try to establish a collaborative relationship with them. It is not our role to direct their actions, demand information, etc. We frequently have different recommendations than DCFS, but we should always operate in the mode of “agreeing to disagree”.
- Seek assistance from your supervisor. Let us know what information you need and any challenges you are having reaching a worker before you become frustrated. We see the DCFS workers at court, Family Team Meetings, etc. on a regular basis. We can speak to the worker during those events and get the needed information.

Difficulty scheduling visits with the child’s caretaker:

- This, too, should not be viewed as something personal. Children’s caretakers have roles other than being the caretaker to your CASA child. Many of our foster parents and relative caregivers have jobs, other children, and activities not related to our CASA kids. Foster parents are responsible for making the child available for visits with parents, doctor’s appointments, counseling appointments, meeting with DCFS, etc.
- Make sure that the caretaker understands your role and how often to expect a visit from you at the first meeting.

- Schedule your visits early in the month, just in case conflicts arise. You'll have plenty of room to reschedule.
- Schedule the next month's visit prior to leaving the current month's visit.

Long court days and having to wait for your case to be called:

- The court system is as overwhelmed with cases as DCFS is. Please try to be mindful of that and remember that each case deserves equal attention.
- Make good use of the "wait time". DCFS workers are present for the hearings. This is a great time to find a quiet corner and discuss the case with them. Our children, parents, and caretakers are frequently at court. Schedule a time to meet with the parents while other cases are being heard. Bring an age appropriate activity such as a coloring book, cards, etc. to engage your CASA child while they are waiting. Our CASA kids are often anxious about court and would love to spend some time with you to distract them from being so nervous.
- Bring a book or magazine to help "pass the time." Cell phones and other electronic devices are prohibited, but take advantage of the time to make grocery lists or catching up on your reading. If you select a book or publication that counts towards your CASA In-Service Hours, you can work on meeting the required 12 in-service hours for the year.
- Put this in perspective, you generally only have court two times per year for your case. Court is extremely important but in the big picture, we spend less time in court than we do fulfilling our role as a CASA Volunteer. It is very important and the judges are having to make life altering decisions about all of the children on the docket. While your case is the most important to you, every child deserves to have full attention given to their case.

These are just a few things that can become factors in us losing focus and motivation. It is important to stop frequently and remember why you became a CASA volunteer and how much your work means to your CASA child. They need you! Your supervisor is always available to you and we encourage you to seek support when you feel your energy level dropping. We need you to keep up the good fight!