

Advocating With Purpose

CASA volunteers wear so many hats and do so many things for their CASA children and their own families! Sometimes the juggling act of scheduling visits, completing Optima Contact Logs, completing court reports, attending Family Team Meetings, checking school attendance, talking to counselors, checking in on the parents' case plan compliance, and going to court hearings cause advocates to forget the purpose of that work. The purpose of our work is always to help the children that we serve have a safe and permanent home as quickly as possible. What a huge task!

We do realize that we ask a lot from our advocates, but we know your hearts and we know that you want to do the best job possible in being the voice of your CASA child. Remember that a child's CASA is the only person in the court room that is advocating exclusively for their best interest. Below is the **PURPOSE** behind every task:

Visits: An advocate's visit with their CASA child should not just be a check off on our "CASA To-Do List". The time you spend with your child is very important to him or her, but visits should be quality. How else can a volunteer get to know their child? The visit should also make that child feel special. Kids have great intuition – they know when you are in a hurry and are "squeezing the visit in". You don't have to interrogate the child at the visit, but ask them about their last visit with mom or dad, how they did on their last math test, what books they are reading, etc. They are one of the most valuable sources of information – the case is about them! If you are advocating for a baby, take note of what they are doing that is "new". Babies and toddlers should show developmental progress from month to month. Ask their caretaker about their schedule and what new things that they have noticed the child doing. This will help you assess the child's relationship with their caretaker.

Optima Contact Logs: These logs are the only documentation of the things you observed and were told during your visit. We are charged with the duty of providing information to the court to make decisions about a child's future. Every detail of your visit that pertains to that child or a significant person in that child's life is important. There is no way for you to remember those details when we are trying to make advocacy decisions. Advocates should use their logs as reminders of what they need to follow up on and to see what progress has been made from the last visit. Advocate Supervisors rely on your logs when we are reviewing your court reports or working with you to advocate outside of court. Contact Logs are more than a way to count the time you spent visiting, the purpose of contact logs are to record details and facts.

Checking School Attendance: Education is a crucial component of a child's well-being but is often overlooked by our foster parents. Our DCFS Workers are incredibly overwhelmed and often can't take the time to speak to school officials. It is important to know if our kids are failing subjects, having disciplinary issues, or not attending school. If we discover that our CASA child is struggling with Math, we can advocate in and out of court for a tutor. Children may act out at school and not in their foster homes. Behavioral issues could be an outward symptom of the stress they are feeling from being separated from their parents. We can't advocate for services if we don't know there is an issue.

Talking to Counselors and Other Service Providers: CASA volunteers are charged with the task of gathering information about the children they are assigned to and their parents. Counselors, parenting coaches, and substance abuse providers have crucial information that we need to evaluate permanency. A child's counselor can provide a professional opinion on whether or not a child is adjusting to their new placement or if the child is traumatized due to being separated from his or her birth family. Substance abuse providers can give you better insight on how the parents are progressing in treatment. Substance abuse recovery is a major battle and we should not measure parental progress on drug screen results alone. The parenting coach that is working with the family can tell you if the parent is receptive to skills or doesn't seem to grasp the material. That information is much more important than simply finding out if they attended the class.

Parental Case Plan Compliance and Visiting with Parents: This component of being a CASA is usually the part that advocates like the least. It takes time, you might have to track mom or dad down, and quite frankly you may be a little ticked at them for abusing and neglecting your CASA child. This is an absolutely normal reaction, but we have to go back to our purpose of giving children a voice and working to help them have a safe and permanent home as quickly as possible. Our parents get a minimum of one year to work towards this. Most of our kids just want to go home. It is impossible to make an informed recommendation about the parents' ability to reunify with their child if we don't have this information.

Attending Family Team Meetings: This meeting is facilitated by DCFS and is one of the best times to gather information from DCFS and to visit with the child's parents. This is also an opportunity for us to ask for services to be added to a child's case plan. Our advocacy is not limited to court hearings. If your work or school schedule does not allow you to attend, please take the time to provide your Advocate Supervisor with a list of questions or concerns. Don't be timid about asking DCFS for any service that would benefit your CASA child. It is also a good time to advocate for any services that you think a parent may need to address the reason that a child entered foster care.

Preparing a Court Report and Participating in Court Hearings: Court hearings are where official decisions are made about our CASA children. Volunteers have more knowledge than anyone and our reports are a crucial part of the court record. Judges count on us to give them information. The child's attorney is representing wishes, not best interest, and may have only seen the child for five minutes just before the hearing. You know your child better than anyone in that court room. Great court outcomes start with great court reports. Please work hard every single month on gathering the information that is outlined above and work early with your advocate supervisor so we can submit a report that generates a court ruling that will make a good impact. Your presence also makes a powerful statement to the court. All of the work that you do for your CASA child is because you are focused on that child and are willing to sacrifice time to be that child's voice. There are certainly times that you just can't come, and if there is a strong report, your supervisor will stand in for you. But nothing can replace the power of a CASA volunteer's words. You know your child and are the best person to advocate for them in court.

If you are struggling with time management or a particular task, talk to your supervisor about solutions. Your work is so important and valuable; please don't let the busyness of the work make you forget why you are a CASA.