

Ethical Decision Making for CASA Volunteers

The concept of ethical decision making is confusing. Many consider morals and ethics to be interchangeable. While both terms relate to “right” and “wrong” conduct, the terms are different. Morals refer to an individual’s personal values and principles related to their decision making. Ethics are rules provided by an external source that guide decision making, such as codes of conduct or standards within a profession or workplace.

Ethical codes of conduct or standards of practice exist for those working in the helping field as a foundation for guiding decision making. The National Association of Social Workers provides a Code of Ethics for licensed Social Workers. Human Services Professionals are guided by the National Organization of Human Services Ethical Standards for Human Services Professionals. Licensed Counselors in Louisiana are led by Rules, Standards, and Procedures of the Louisiana Board of Examiners. While CASA Volunteers are not licensed practitioners in the human services field, they play a vital role in the child welfare system. Ethical decision-making skills for CASA Programs and Volunteers are guided by National CASA Standards.

Volunteers receive a copy of Child Advocacy Services’ “Advocate Policy and Procedures Manual” during their pre-service training. The policies outlined in this document are in accordance with National CASA Standards and provide the framework for CASA Volunteers’ work. We encourage CASA Volunteers to refer to this manual on a regular basis as a reminder of your roles, responsibilities, and professional ethics. Below are some key components from the manual that guide our work and decision-making processes:

Duties/Responsibilities of CASA

- To read the records and files of the court, Social Service agency, or case reports from any school, hospital, doctor, therapist, or other individual or agency regarding the child the CASA have agreed to represent.
- Identify and advocate for the best interest of the child.
- **To have at least one monthly meaningful face to face visit with the child or children to whom the CASA is assigned.** If the advocate is not able to visit the child monthly, written justification will be submitted explaining why.
- To interview pertinent parties and research and evaluate facts and circumstances of the child’s life. Pertinent parties could include the parents, siblings, relatives, foster parents, teachers, counselors, doctors, and other care providers.
- To keep all information confidential, disclosing only to the court, caseworker, or attorneys involved in the case. Information should also be shared with the Advocate Supervisor. Under no circumstances should any information regarding the case be revealed to anyone with no legal interest in the proceedings.
- To keep all written data in a locked, confidential area.
- To attend all court hearings and report to the court, in concise written form, the facts and findings resulting from the CASA’s fact finding and to make independent recommendations to the court with the support of CASA staff.

- To communicate on a regular basis with the parties involved in the case and seek cooperative solutions.
- To facilitate and monitor fulfillment of the orders of the court.
- To bring to the attention of the caseworker or attorney any change in circumstances that may require modifications of the court order in a timely manner.
- Assess the identified permanency plan for appropriateness based on child specific observations.
- Participate in DCFS case conferences with CASA staff.
- To consult monthly with CASA staff concerning the developments of the case, your findings, and opinions.
- To document case contacts and pertinent updates into OPTIMA to ensure a complete case record on the CASA's assigned children.
- To terminate the advocate's involvement only upon approval of the Court, CASA staff, or when the advocate can no longer be considered objective.
- To return all paperwork associated with an assigned case to the CASA office once the advocate's responsibility has ended.
- To always conduct themselves professionally, being respectful, tactful, and patient while performing their duties as an advocate, keeping in mind that they are acting under the direct authority of the Court.
- To report any incident of child abuse and/or neglect, or any situation in which the CASA volunteer has reason to believe that a child is in imminent danger to the child. This report should be made to the advocate's supervisor, the Department of Children and Family Services, and/or local police department.
- To read the agency's newsletter so that you may remain informed of calendar events, news, and policy information.
- To be aware that Child Advocacy Services covers the 20th, 21st, 23rd, 29th and 40th Judicial Districts. The CASA staff makes every effort to assign cases within the CASA volunteer's geographic area, but CASAs may be asked to travel outside their area due to case transfers and/or new placements.

CASAs Are Not:

CASAs are not caseworkers, counselors, babysitters, lawyers, friends of the family, or mentors. The role of a CASA is clearly defined in statute and National CASA standards. Any requests to perform duties consistent with the above-mentioned titles should be directed to the Advocate Supervisor.

CASAs Should Never:

- Take physical custody of a child.
- Have their assigned child on an overnight visit.
- Leave a child unattended.
- Allow their husband, wife, children, friends, etc. to accompany them on a visit with the CASA child and/or family.
- Give their CASA child medication, including cold medicine, aspirin, etc.

- Use alcohol or other controlled substances in the presence of or prior to a visit with the CASA child.
- Transport the child or family.
- Buy the child expensive gifts.
- Withhold information from their supervisor or DCFS caseworker.
- Report unverified information to the court as fact.
- Discuss concerns/disputes with supervisor or DCFS worker with assigned family.
- Make a commitment to a child, a family, their supervisor, or caseworker they do not intend to honor.

CODE OF ETHICS

- Abide by this Code of Ethics and all laws and regulations governing their activities.
- Be in compliance with all CASA policies and procedures.
- Respect a child's inherent right to grow up with dignity in a safe environment that meets the child's best interests.
- Uphold the credibility and dignity of the CASA concept by conducting all business in an honest, fair, professional, and humane manner.
- Notify the program of any criminal charges.
- Not use my authority inappropriately, nor condone any illegal act or unethical practices related to the program or community.
- Not use CASA to promote personal gain.
- Avoid any action which could adversely affect the confidence of the public in the integrity of the program.
- Serve and respond to requests without bias because of race, religion, national origin, age, sex, disability, or veteran status.
- Refrain from any and all situations that may create a conflict of interest. Examples include, but are not limited to:
 - Using Child Advocacy Services or its relationship with the court to express his/her own personal views on an issue.
 - Attempting to serve as a placement resource or foster parent for a child that the advocate is assigned to or was previously assigned to.
 - Using the agency letterhead or name to express political views.
- Respect the right to privacy of all individuals and keep information about CASA cases confidential.

Confidentiality:

- A CASA may not distribute information about a case to members of the general public who have no legal interest in the proceeding. Information may not be repeated to the press even if it has been previously stated in the media. This includes photos of the minor.
- A CASA does not use first or last names or reveal any other information which would identify the CASA child or family while discussing with a person not directly involved with the case (including the CASA's spouse and immediate family).

- A CASA shall always protect all case materials and OPTIMA login information from view and/or access.
- All attorneys and interested parties receive copies of the CASA's report. However, all reports must be distributed through the CASA office and all information approved by the Advocate Supervisor and/or Program Director. A motion must be filed through the court to obtain documentation from a CASA case file.
- Once a case terminates and/or a CASA is no longer assigned, all notes and other associated paperwork must be returned to the CASA office within 7 days.

SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY:

Guidelines and Best Practices for Personal Social Networking:

- Employees and volunteers should not engage past or present clients in social networking relationships. This includes CASA children and related family members.
- Employees, volunteers, and Board of Directors are personally responsible for the content they publish on personal social networking sites. They should be mindful that their post is visible to the entire online world.
- Put the advocate's relationship with Child Advocacy Services first. Ensure that the personal social media profile and the content posted reflect positively on the advocate's professional role at CAS.
- Be aware that actions captured in photos, posts, or comments can reflect on the image of CAS.
- Maintain confidentiality! Do not post confidential information about CAS, clients, employees, member agencies, stakeholders, partners, or others.
- Respect the privacy of others, respect the audience, and participate productively. Do not use personal insults, slurs, obscenity, or engage in any conduct that would be unacceptable in the CASA role.
- Share information that is relative to the CAS mission. Post material that is related to our programming and is of interest to our stakeholders and partners.
- Work matters and services come first. Ensure that personal social networking does not interfere with the CASA role. Consult with the Advocate Supervisor if uncertain about the appropriateness of what is being published.

Child Advocacy Services' Advocate Policy and Procedures Manual" in its entirety provides more details regarding your work. Please request another copy from your supervisor if you did not keep the manual after finishing pre-service training. The information above is taken from the document but only covers key principles. Please utilize these protocols as the foundation in making ethical decisions as a CASA Volunteer.