April 2025 – Advocate Refresher

Staying in Your Lane: What We Do vs. What We Do Not Do

Our CASA children and families have many people involved in their case. We have foster care workers, foster care supervisors, attorneys, and service providers working within the child welfare system. CASA Volunteers have a very unique role that is often confusing for our CASA children, their foster parents, and their biological parents. It is imperative that CASA Volunteers understand what their responsibilities are as well as what the expected duties are of everyone involved in the case. Maintaining appropriate boundaries starts with having a clear definition of what we should be doing versus what others should be doing.

Let's begin with defining the CASA Volunteer's responsibilities. The National CASA Association explains that "***Court-appointed special advocate (CASA) and guardian ad litem (GAL) volunteers advocate for the best-interests of children who have experienced abuse or neglect. Volunteers work with child welfare professionals, educators, and service providers to ensure that judges have the information they need to make the most well-informed decisions for each child***" (National CASA Website 2024). We accomplish this by spending quality time with the child or children we are assigned to. Volunteers dedicate time each month to listen and talk with their assigned child. Effective advocacy also requires scheduling time to talk to and listen to significant others in the child's life to gather information about what that child needs to heal and thrive. CASA Volunteers also monitor safety.

Foster parents play a significant part in the child welfare system. A foster parent may be a relative or fictive relative that the child knew prior to entering foster care or a certified foster parent that the child is just getting to know. The role of the foster parent is to provide a safe and nurturing home for the child while parents are working to reunify with their child. Foster parents are charged with the duties of getting children to medical, dental, and mental health appointments as well as overseeing the day to day parenting roles while the child is in their care.

While the foster parent is a great source of information, CASA Volunteers should not utilize the foster parent as the sole source of information. It is important to establish boundaries early on in the case regarding gathering information and sharing information. CASA Volunteers must be careful to keep child visits focused on the child and not spend the majority of the visit talking to the foster parents. We should never share information regarding court proceedings or information that we have gathered with foster parents. Please direct them to ask the foster care worker or child's attorney for those types of questions.

Foster parents often vent to volunteers about disciplinary issues that our CASA children are having. **CASA Volunteers should never take on the role of addressing behaviors.** Volunteers should advocate for trauma informed services for the child and the foster parents. Resources such as Trust Based Relational Intervention (TBRI) classes for foster parents and counseling for the child may be recommended to address this.

Foster Care Workers are assigned to both the child and the child's parents. It is important that CASA Volunteers understand this. Foster Care Workers are great sources of information regarding parental case plan progress. CASA Volunteers should know what is expected of the parents and what progress is being made. The Foster Care Worker is the person that makes

placement decisions and service referrals. CASA Volunteers should never make a referral for direct services for a child or parent but work collaboratively with the Foster Care Worker to accomplish this.

Foster parents and biological parents are often frustrated with the foster care worker. CASA Volunteers must establish a clear boundary when talking with these parties. We can provide the frustrated person with additional methods of contacting their worker or the worker's supervisor, but we should not become involved in that conflict. Our role is to advocate for the child; not resolving conflicts between parents, foster parents, and the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). It is our responsibility to objectively investigate any concerns expressed by any party that directly impacts the CASA child. CASA Volunteers should never discuss their frustration with a DCFS employee with the family or foster family.

There are many attorneys involved in Child in Need of Care (CINC) court proceedings. Each parent is entitled to an attorney and more often than not the Office of the Public Defender provides representation to the parent. The Department of Children and Family Services is represented by the District Attorney's Office (DA's Office) and/or the department's Bureau of General Counsel (BGC). Children also have a court appointed attorney who will advocate for the child's wishes or best interest if the child is too young to express his or her wishes.

While we do not have frequent contact with the attorneys outside of court, it is important to understand each attorney's role. We will begin with the role of the child's attorney. Remember that CASA Volunteers provide court advocacy regarding the child's best interest. The child's attorney is primarily advocating for the child's wishes. As we know, a child's wishes and a child's best interest are often different. While it is important that CASA Volunteers know what their child's wishes are as it relates to permanency, we are charged with the duty of advocating for what is in their best interest. Their attorney will advocate for their wishes.

Parents' attorneys will argue for their client's desired outcome. While they do counsel their clients on what is in their best interest, they are ultimately working for that specific client. It is important that CASA Volunteers understand this and maintain objectivity when submitting information about parents to the court. CASA Volunteers should not engage in negative conversations about a parent's attorney with foster parents or foster care workers.

The DA's Office or BGC is representing the state. In CINC Cases, DCFS is the state. Those attorneys must argue on behalf of the agency's recommendations. CASA's recommendations may be different than those of DCFS. It is important to understand this and to remember that each role is defined and that ultimately the judge is the decision maker. CASA, the DA's Office, the child's attorney, the parents' attorneys, and the Bureau of General Counsel are presenting fact based information to the court to assure that the judge has pertinent information when making decisions. CASA Volunteers should submit professionally written, fact based court reports to the court timely and be prepared for testimony. We should not take courtroom arguments or rulings personally or engage in negative conversations with parents or foster parents regarding hearings.

Biological parents have the legal right to work towards reunification with their child or children unless there are special circumstances that are defined in the Louisiana Children's Code. They have at least twelve months to work their case plans and can be given additional time if there are compelling reasons for the court to maintain the goal of reunification beyond the mandated

twelve months. CASA Volunteers should have regular contact with biological parents. Biological parents are a great source for gathering information about their children. We should ask them questions regarding the child's previous medical history, the child's academic progress, and what activities the child enjoyed prior to entering foster care. Biological parents can give us details about significant adults who were involved in our CASA child's life and what community connections were important to the family. If our CASA child's parents are actively working their case plan, we should have interactions with that parent. This is important in assessing safety as it relates to reunification.

CASA Volunteers should not make arrangements for parents to visit with children in foster care or deliver messages from parents to our CASA children. We are not the parents' advocate, and the parents should be directed to the foster care worker or their attorney as it relates to visitation and child contacts. CASA Volunteers may advocate for more parent/child interaction when there are no safety concerns by speaking with the foster care worker. CASA Volunteers should speak with their advocate supervisor for case specific guidance as it relates to this matter. Each case is specific and there may be no contact orders or other reasons that visits are suspended or supervised.

Our primary role in our CASA child's life is to be their advocate. We advocate for safety, permanency, and overall well-being. It is important for us to remember the importance of this task. CASA Volunteers and CASA Staff are charged with the specific duty of promoting a child's best interest during court proceedings. While the child's attorney argues for the child's wishes, we make recommendations regarding what is in that child's best interest. It is critical for CASA Volunteers to maintain appropriate boundaries when gathering the information necessary to assess best interest. Understanding our role, the role of others along with maintaining confidentiality and objectivity, is essential for effective advocacy.

References:

National CASA Website. (2024). Retrieved from: https://nationalcasagal.org/advocate-for-children/be-a-casa-gal-volunteer/