

Evaluating Permanency Goals

One of the most important roles of a CASA Volunteer is advocating for the children they are assigned to in court. The judges count on volunteers to provide them with information on what is in a child's best interest. Our children have attorneys that are bound to advocate for the child's wishes; and quite often those wishes are not always the same as best interest.

National CASA Standards define the "Best Interest" Principle as:

- A safe home
- A permanent home
- As quickly as possible

As advocates, all three of these categories should be evaluated each visit and addressed in every court report. All of us assess the child's placement at every visit and are quick to speak up for the child if there is a safety concern. It's easy to get caught up in that first component and not focus as much on the children having a permanent home in a timely manner. The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) dictates that permanency planning should begin as soon as the child enters foster care and that permanency for the child should be complete within 12 months of the child entering care unless there are compelling reasons to extend that timeframe.

Our court reports should address the child's permanency goal and progress of the parents and the Department of Children and Family Services efforts in reaching that goal. Below are the four most common case plan goals and questions for you to consider when this is the goal or if you feel that a goal should change:

Reunification: Unless there is an extreme circumstance, parents must be given 12 months to work towards reunifying with their children. When evaluating the appropriateness of this goal, please consider the following:

- Are the parents visiting regularly with their child?
- How do the parent and child interact?
- Is the child happy to see their parent?
- Is the child upset when they have to leave the parent visit?
- What compliance has the parent or parents made in addressing the reasons that the child came into care?
- What are the barriers for the parents in completing their case plan?
- Does the parent have a home for the child to return to?

- What support systems are available to the parents if and when the child is returned home?
- Are there concerns for the child's safety if he or she is returned to his parents?
- Is the parent working their case plan and addressing the issues that caused the child to come into care and is there a demonstrated behavior change?

Adoption: If a parent is unable or unwilling to work a case plan to reunify with the child, CASA volunteers may ask the court to consider changing the child's goal to Adoption. In order for a child to be freed from adoption, the state must file a petition to terminate the parents' rights to the child or children. When evaluating this case plan goal, please consider the following:

- Is there any reason that the filing of a petition for termination of parental rights is not in the best interest of the child?
- Is the current placement a possible adoptive home?
- Is the current home a certified foster home or a relative placement that will need to be certified as an adoptive home?
- How old is the child?

Guardianship: If adoption is not possible or if there are other compelling reasons, particularly in the case of older children, volunteers may ask the court to consider changing the child's goal to Guardianship. With Guardianship, parents retain their parental rights and may be able to petition the court at a later date to regain guardianship of their children. When evaluating this case plan goal, please consider the following:

- Are the current caretakers willing to accept Permanent Guardianship of the child or children?
- Does the caretaker understand that this legally binds the caretaker to caring for and providing for the child until the child's 18th birthday?
- Is the caretaker certified through the Department of Children and Family Services as a foster parent? (This information is needed to determine if the caretaker will be eligible to receive a subsidy for continued financial assistance until the child's 18th birthday if Guardianship is granted.)
- If the child currently has a positive relationship with their biological parent, will the caretaker allow continued contact between the parent and child?
- How old is the child?
- Does the child wish for the current caretaker to become their permanent guardian?

Alternative Permanent Living Arrangements (APLA): This goal should be considered only after all of the above goals have been ruled out. A case plan goal of APLA means that the child will age out in foster care. Please consider the following when evaluating this goal:

- Why is Reunification not possible for the child?
- Why is Adoption not possible for the child?
- Why is Guardianship not possible for the child?
- How many years will the child have to be in foster care until his or her 18th birthday?
- Have all possible relative placement resources been explored?
- Does the child have siblings that are not in care or are placed with another relative? If so, are sibling visits taking place?
- Are there any appropriate family members that can be a visitation resource to the child?
- Are services in place to help the child transition into adulthood?
- What is the child's educational level?
- Is the child eligible for Extended Foster Care? Children that age out prior to completing high school or obtaining a high school equivalency certificate may choose to remain in Extended Foster Care. The court case and the CASA case would close but the child would continue to receive support services and some financial assistance until they complete high school.

Your input regarding permanency is very important! Please staff your recommendations regarding the case plan goal with your supervisor before you begin working on your court report. Your work makes a huge difference in the lives of the children we serve!