



CASA of Marion County

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- Over 6000 children are in foster care in WV.
- Over 200 children are in foster care in Marion County.
- It is common for children who grow up in long term foster care to move more than 15 times.
- The median time a child spends in foster care is just over a year.
- Neglect is the number one reason children are removed.

What is a CASA?

A Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) is a trained citizen who is appointed by a judge to represent the best interest of a child in court. All of the children are victims of abuse and neglect, and have been removed from their homes. Children helped by CASAs include those for whom placement is being determined in circuit court.

What is the CASA volunteer's role?

CASA volunteers research the child's circumstances, determine relevant facts in a child's case and report this information to the court. Their work helps to support the court's decision concerning the child's future. A CASA volunteer focuses their recommendations and actions to ensure the best interests of the child are being met. Every case is unique, but a CASA often must recommend to the court whether or not a child should be reunified with their biological parents or be considered for permanency elsewhere. Though the final decision always rests with the judge, a CASA volunteer does his or her best to inform the court as an independent and objective voice for the child. The CASA is the child's voice in the courtroom.

How does a CASA gather information to establish recommendations to the court?

To prepare recommendations, a CASA volunteer talks with the child, parents, family members, caseworkers, school officials, and others who have knowledge of the child's history. A CASA volunteer observes interactions between the child and parent and reviews case-related material. Collectively,

the information gathered is analyzed in order to form a recommendation. In other words, a CASA talks with people that may have a "piece" of information that helps give the judge the "big picture". This way, he or she has a better understanding of the child to make more informed decisions for the child's best interest on obtaining a safe, permanent home as quickly as possible.

How does the role of a CASA volunteer differ from a social worker?

In West Virginia, social workers are generally employed by the county's DoHS. They sometimes are responsible for as many as 30 or more cases at a time, which limits the time they have to spend with each child. The CASA volunteer works with only one sibling set at a time and therefore has more time to research each child's individual needs. The CASA volunteer does not replace a social worker on a case; their is an independent appointee of the court assigned to thoroughly research the child's case, explore community resources, and make a recommendation to the court, independent of agency restrictions.

How does the role of a CASA volunteer differ from an attorney?

The CASA volunteer does not provide legal representation in the courtroom. That is the role of the attorney, or Guardian Ad Litem. However, the CASA volunteer can provide crucial information that assists attorneys in presenting their cases.

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Is there a “typical” CASA Volunteer?

CASA volunteers come from all walks of life, with a variety of professional, educational, and ethnic backgrounds. Volunteers are both male and female. We have volunteers who work full or part time jobs, some are students, and others are retired. Because the children served by CASA volunteers are diverse in background and need, we strive to recruit volunteers diverse in skill.

How does the CASA volunteer relate to the child he or she represents?

CASA volunteers offer children trust and advocacy during complex legal proceedings. They explain to the child the events that are happening, the reason there is court, and the roles the judge, lawyers, and social workers play in an age appropriate way. CASA volunteers also encourage the child to express their own opinion and hopes, while remaining objective observers.

How much time does it require to be a CASA volunteer?

Each case is different. When a case is initially assigned, a CASA may spend around five hours per week researching the case history and connecting with people. Volunteers spend anywhere from five to fifteen hours a month thereafter. Some cases may continue for two years or longer and volunteers are asked to commit until a case has been closed. Because caseworker and service provider turnover is very high, often the CASA volunteer is the only consistent presence in the child's life.

Do CASA volunteers receive training?

Yes, a CASA volunteer receives thorough training. The pre-service training takes around 30 hours. Through this training volunteers learn about courtroom procedure and effective advocacy techniques for children. They are educated about specific topics ranging from child sexual abuse to how to write a court report. The culmination of the pre-service training is the swearing in ceremony

by the local court circuit judge. Volunteers also have opportunities during the course of the year to attend in-service trainings, which focus on relevant and timely topics. In addition, CASA volunteers are required to complete 12 hours of in-service training annually.

On average, how many cases does a CASA carry at any given time?

Although the number may vary, the average is one or two cases. Keeping a low caseload is important because it allows the CASA volunteer to have a thorough knowledge of the case and time necessary to provide quality advocacy. In overburdened child welfare and court systems, this one-on-one attention helps keep vulnerable children from slipping through the cracks.

Are there any other agencies or groups that provide the same service?

No. There are other child advocacy organizations, but CASA is the only program where volunteers are appointed by the court to represent a child's best interest.

Are CASA volunteer programs effective?

The US Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General (OIG) conducted an audit of the National CASA association and found the following:

- Children with a CASA volunteer are substantially less likely to spend time in long-term foster care, defined as more than 3 years in care: 13.3% for CASA cases versus 27.0% of all children in foster care.
- When a CASA volunteer was involved, both children and their parents were ordered by the courts to receive more services
- Cases involving a CASA volunteer are more likely to be “permanently closed” (i.e. the children are less likely to reenter the child welfare system) than cases where a CASA volunteer is not involved.