



## Voices for Children San Diego

### MISSION AND VISION

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- **Mission:** Voices for Children transforms the lives of abused children by providing them with volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs).
- **Vision:** We believe that every child deserves a safe and permanent home, and to that end, will provide a CASA to every child in the foster care system who needs one, monitor every court file in the system, and advocate to improve the lives of foster children.

### NOTABLE FACTS:

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- Voices for Children is the 5<sup>th</sup> largest CASA organization in the United States (there are 966 CASA programs nationwide).
- In the state of California, VFC is by far largest of the 49 CASA programs in the state (and, in fact, is the largest CASA program in the Western U.S.). Approximately 20% of all California children who have CASAs are served by VFC.
- Voices for Children won the highly-competitive Kaleidoscope Award for Excellence in Board Governance from the University of San Diego 2014 in recognition of its organizational excellence.

### ORGANIZATION

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- **President/CEO (since 1997):** Sharon M. Lawrence, Esq.
- **Annual Operating Budget:** \$5,400,000
- **Number of Staff:** 73
- **Number of CASA Volunteers in FY2014-15:** 1,500
- **Number of San Diego Foster Children Served With CASA in FY2014-15:** 2,400
- **Number of Foster Children Whose Cases Are Assessed Annually:** Every foster child in the system (5,100)

- **Board of Directors:** 25 members; Chair is David Bialis, Senior Vice President & General Manager of Cox Communications California; 100% of the Board are donors to Voices for Children
- **Judicial Oversight:** Voices for Children operates under a contract with the State of California Judicial Council, enabling it to provide CASA services in San Diego and Riverside Counties.
- **National & State Affiliation:** Voices for Children is a member in good standing of the National CASA Association and the California CASA Association; Sharon Lawrence serves on the Board of CalCASA.

## WHAT IS A CASA VOLUNTEER?

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- **CASAs are *Court Appointed Special Advocates*.** To be a CASA requires no special prior experience, and our CASAs are men and women of all ages, and from every walk of life.
- They apply to become a CASA, and if accepted into training, attend “Advocate University”—a free, specialized training program of Voices for Children. Training encompasses 36 hours—half in a classroom, half on-line. If training is successfully completed, the new CASA is sworn in by a Superior Court Judge, and becomes an “officer of the court.”
- Voices for Children matches the CASA volunteer with a child or sibling group, and the advocacy begins. The court authorizes them to become involved in all aspects of the child’s case and gain access to their records. They also have access to schools, school records, medical professionals, and anyone else involved in the child’s life. As the Juvenile Court’s eyes and ears for children in foster care, these volunteer advocates speak up on their child’s behalf and help them through what is often a confusing and scary time.

## How is Voices for Children Funded?

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- The organization is unusual in comparison to other San Diego human services organization, since Voices for Children is currently 97% privately funded.
- Even though Voices works so closely with the Court system, almost all of its operations are funded by private individuals, foundations, corporations, service groups, and special events. Currently, the only government funding is a \$60,000 allocation from the Judicial Council of the State of California, and occasional project grants from the County Board of Supervisors.

## WHY DO FOSTER CHILDREN NEED CASA VOLUNTEERS?

- Foster children have been removed from their homes due to abuse, neglect, or abandonment. Many feel very much alone—until they meet their CASA. While the foster care system comprises many talented and passionate professionals, it is also overburdened:
  - A social worker may juggle a caseload of 16 to 25
  - A lawyer carries approximately 100 cases
  - And, judges oversee approximately 500 cases
  - These individuals all want to make the best decisions they can for a child’s well-being, but often don’t have the time needed to gather all the information necessary to see the complete picture.
- CASA volunteers devote their attention to one child or a sibling group at a time, closely monitoring the child’s situation and ensuring their needs are met. CASAs are often the only consistent adult presence in a child’s life—the one person a child can truly count on who is not paid to oversee their welfare.

- Foster children with CASAs are healthier and happier than those without CASAs. Foster children with CASAs do better in school and are more likely to graduate than those without CASAs, and are less likely to become delinquent or abuse drugs. Studies show that:
  - Foster children with CASAs are more likely to be adopted.
  - Children with CASAs are less likely to re-enter the child welfare system.
  - Children with CASAs tend to receive necessary services sooner, for a longer duration, and more consistently.
  - 20% more children with CASAs passed all school courses and were significantly less likely to be expelled.
  - Children with CASAs scored significantly higher than other foster children on protective factors scales such as sense of acceptance, controls against deviant behavior, positive attitude for the future, and ability to work with others.

### **What Is A CASA?**

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CASAs advocate for their child in Court and school, and in other aspects of their lives. The CASA's role is to consider what is in the child's best interest and to make sure that their individual needs are met. CASAs monitor their child's case and do the following:

- Act as fact-finders and provide the court with information about the child
- Gather information from court documents, social workers' files, and educational, medical and therapy records.
- Assist the social worker in identifying issues important to the child
- They also speak with the child, family members, school officials, health care providers, and other professionals involved in the child's life.
- Facilitate visits between siblings
- Maintain a consistent and supportive relationship with the child
- Participate in the child's education and contribute to educational decisions
- Make recommendations regarding the child's best interests in a written court report, which is completed with the support of their VFC staff supervisor.

CASAs visit with their case children at least once a month, but often more frequently. This provides the children with stability and consistency, and allows the CASAs to better understand the needs of the children as well as the hopes and dreams of the children themselves. Some CASAs build and maintain positive, trusting relationships with their case children, much like mentors. With just 10-15 hours a month, CASAs can make a real difference in the life of a child.

### **Eligibility Requirements:**

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- Be at least 21 years of age
- Commit to a minimum 18 months of volunteer service
- Have a valid driver's license
- Clear a criminal background check and DMV record check
- Be willing to drive to a variety of locations throughout San Diego County
- For the protection of the children, be able to maintain confidentiality and professional boundaries