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## News Release

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### VOICES FOR CHILDREN, SAN DIEGO TO OPERATE VOLUNTEER COURT APPOINTED ADVOCACY SERVICES TO CHILDREN IN RIVERSIDE COUNTY

(January 21, 2015) San Diego— Voices for Children (VFC) will now oversee the recruiting, training, and supervising of volunteers who are appointed by the juvenile court to advocate and speak up for abused and/or neglected children living in Riverside County's foster care system.

Founded in 1980, Voices for Children has been the CASA Program for San Diego County since 1983, and is one of the nation's premiere CASA programs. In addition to being the largest CASA program in the Western United States, it ranks in the top five of all 950 existing CASA programs. Voices for Children has entered into agreements with both the Superior Court of California, County of Riverside and the Judicial Council of California to provide Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) services to foster children in Riverside County. The agreements extend to September 30, 2015, and are renewable annually.

California law allows the Juvenile Court to designate an organization as its official CASA program. This designated CASA program gives volunteer advocates the ability to investigate an abused and/or neglected child's circumstances, develop a relationship with the child, and make best interest recommendations to the Juvenile Court.

The nonprofit organization called CASA for Riverside County, Inc. previously served as the designated CASA program for Riverside County. However, the Juvenile Court withdrew this official designation as of August 31, 2014. Also, at that time, the Judicial Council of California elected not to fund the program for another year and both the California CASA Association (CalCASA), and the National CASA Association withdrew their recognition of the organization. Since then, the Juvenile Court and the children under its jurisdiction have been without a CASA program. Accordingly, CASA for Riverside County, Inc. no longer provides any services to the Juvenile Courts in Riverside County, nor does it facilitate any CASA advocacy to children.

In an effort to minimize the impact on the children, and at the request of the Judge, the Riverside County Children's Services Division, Department of Public Social Services (CSD) generously agreed to help volunteers become identified as important persons, lifelong connections, or other designations that allowed continued contact with the children. While volunteers did not have the same duties and authority of an official CASA volunteer, they did have the ability to maintain the relationship with the child.

Given San Diego County's direct geographical proximity to Riverside County, and the national reputation and programmatic success, the Judicial Council and California CASA Association reached out to Voices for Children and asked for assistance. Cory Pohley, Chief Executive Officer of the California CASA Association, said, "We are thrilled that Voices for Children is stepping in to rebuild the CASA program in Riverside County. Voices is a model organization with the expertise needed to rebuild CASA and ensure that foster children in Riverside County receive the advocacy and support they so need and deserve."

The Board of Directors of Voices for Children, under the leadership of Board Chair David Bialis, Senior Vice President & General Manager of Cox Communications California, thoughtfully deliberated the decision to rebuild services in Riverside, before taking a final vote on November 12, 2014. Mr. Bialis said, "Our Board ultimately made its decision for the most important reason: the fact that there are thousands of foster

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children in Riverside County who would otherwise have no chance for the kind of quality advocacy we are able to offer so many of our children in San Diego County. We look forward to working with the Riverside community and seeking grants and philanthropic support there to serve the foster children of Riverside County, while we continue to pursue our goal to serve every foster child in San Diego County who needs a CASA.”

During the first months of 2015, Voices for Children will conduct a top-to-bottom needs assessment and plan-of-action for this new initiative, which has an initial goal to serve 50-100 children with CASA volunteers. Voices for Children will hire several staff who will operate from an office in Riverside County and will manage the program, raise funds in the region, and oversee the work of Riverside CASA volunteers. The Riverside CASA Program team will work under the direction of Voices for Children President/CEO Sharon Lawrence. Voices for Children will keep each county’s programs distinct, with separate accounting and maintaining full financial and programmatic transparency. Funds raised in each respective county will be allocated to that county’s CASA program. The Voices for Children Board of Directors has established a Riverside Initiative Oversight Committee of Board members who will work with the management team to monitor activities, and help assess the initiative in September 2015 to determine whether to renew the annual contract designating Voices for Children as the Riverside County CASA organization.

“We at Voices for Children are very excited to take on this new initiative in Riverside County, and we enthusiastically welcome the opportunity to serve more foster children,” said Sharon Lawrence, Esq., President/CEO of Voices for Children since 1997. “We are currently contacting former Riverside County volunteers in the hopes of reinstating them quickly so that they can again advocate for their case children in an official capacity as CASA volunteers, and meeting with prior funders of the Riverside CASA program in hopes that they will again step up to support this important initiative.”

The program will receive a grant from the Judicial Council of California, which has been matched \$1-for-\$1 by a private donor who is concerned about the welfare of Riverside’s foster children. It is anticipated that government funders and foundations will also help rebuild the program to ensure that the foster children in Riverside County have CASAs by their side—in court, in school, and in the community.

Riverside County residents interested in learning more about becoming a CASA volunteer in their area can sign up to be notified when Volunteer Information Sessions commence in Riverside County. Prospective volunteers in both San Diego and Riverside Counties should visit the Voices for Children website at [www.speakupnow.org](http://www.speakupnow.org).

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#### **About Voices for Children**

Voices for Children (VFC) is the only organization in San Diego County and Riverside County authorized to recruit, train, and supervise Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) for abused and neglected children. VFC was founded in San Diego in 1980 and in 2015, celebrates 35 years of service to foster children. VFC is one of the nation’s premiere organizations of its kind, ranking in the top five of all 950 CASA programs in the U.S. in terms of budget size (\$5.4 million), number of children served (2,400), number of CASA volunteers (1,500), and size of staff (73). Since 1997, the President/CEO of Voices for Children has been Sharon M. Lawrence, Esq.; the current Chair of the 25-member VFC Board of Directors is David Bialis, Senior Vice President & General Manager of Cox Communications California. Voices for Children is engaged in an ambitious strategic plan to *Serve Every Child* in the San Diego foster care system who needs a CASA by 2017. Now, beginning In January 2015, Voices for Children has also begun an ambitious plan to serve children in Riverside County as well.