

News Release

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Voices for Children Marks First Year of Volunteer Court Appointed Advocacy Services to Children in Riverside County

(September 2, 2016) Riverside, CA—In June 2016, Voices for Children (VFC), a private, nonprofit organization serving foster children with volunteer CASAs (Court Appointed Special Advocates), marked its first year of providing Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteers for children living in Riverside County's foster care system. Since 1980, VFC has operated the CASA program in San Diego County, and in early 2015, was asked by the State of California Judicial Council to assume responsibility for the then-closed CASA program in Riverside County. In its short time of operation in Riverside, VFC's CASA program has already exceeded its early goals, serving 140 children by 114 CASA volunteers. In June 2015, the new Riverside County CASA program launched.

California law allows the Juvenile Court to designate one organization per County as its official CASA program. This designated CASA program recruits and trains volunteer advocates 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. CASAs review medical records, talk to therapists, meet with family members and relatives, and write a Court report every six months to fill in information that the Court might not otherwise have. Advocates also visit where the child lives, where they go to school, and observe most aspects of the child's life. All of these activities are now taking place in Riverside County as well as San Diego County, thanks to the work of Voices for Children.

Sharon Lawrence, Esq., President/CEO of VFC, in acknowledging the first-year anniversary of operations in Riverside, said, "We are humbled by the outpouring of support and appreciation shown to Voices for Children by the Riverside County Courts, Judges, attorneys, social workers, and other professionals on each foster child's case, as well as by the community who has expressed such concern for the welfare of foster children in Riverside County." said Lawrence. "We are grateful for the many contributions and grants we have received, and to all the organizations and individuals whose financial support has made this expansion possible."

Since it began representing Riverside County, VFC has made tremendous strides in advocating for foster youth. The first class of Riverside County CASAs graduated in June 2015, and volunteers have reported over 5,000 hours advocating for their case children.

VFC Riverside County staff have hosted more than 50 information sessions in the community and online.

In this first year, committed CASA volunteers have already made tremendous impacts on the lives of the children they serve. One outstanding example is a CASA who was assigned to a teen who is in foster care for the third time. Upon meeting this young lady, the CASA knew that she wanted to help her have the bright future that she deserves. The CASA supported her through the college application process, and even accompanied her to an event for newly admitted students at a four-year university in a neighboring county. All the while, the CASA ensured that she did not miss typical senior-year activities, like going to prom and shopping for dormitory supplies. Several CASAs have helped their children transition safely back to their parents while others have helped children who could not be returned to their parents to find forever families.

The organization has been very well received in the community. The County of Riverside Housing Authority has donated office space in the city of Riverside and the Probation Department has donated office space in the Southwest Justice Center located in Murrieta. In February 2016, Jessica Muñoz, Esq., was hired to serve as Program Director for Riverside County. Muñoz oversees the recruitment, training, and supervision of CASAs in Riverside County and is the primary point of contact for child welfare professionals, community leaders, supporters, and other Riverside County stakeholders. She supervises three staff members who recruit, train, and supervise CASAs. Before joining VFC, Muñoz practiced as an attorney for over seven years, including four years in juvenile dependency courts in San Diego and Los Angeles Counties and represented both children and parents. Muñoz has also worked for the University of California, San Diego where she served first as a staff attorney in their Student Legal Services office and later as a program coordinator.

Voices for Children is actively recruiting and training volunteers to navigate the system and act as a voice for foster children in Riverside County. The time commitment for a CASA volunteer is 10 to 15 hours per month, with an 18-month minimum. Often, advocates are simply a person the child can talk to, or attend their school sporting event or graduation ceremony. However, they also fulfil important roles within the Court, to provide Judges with crucial information on the children's needs and best interests. "Advocates can help with the large issues of home placement, education, or medical needs, but they can also help with the smallest details that might have tremendous meaning for a child," said Muñoz. She has stated that "CASAs can significantly change a child's life."

FUNDERS

Thanks to many generous institutional and individual funders, the CASA program in Riverside has been able to achieve exceptional results in just one year. VFC is grateful to each of them, including the following major donors:

Anonymous	City of Riverside CDBG
Judicial Council of California	Holly Ellison
Riverside County Transportation Commission	David Bialis
County of Riverside CID Grants District 2,3 & 4	BNSF Railway Foundation
California CASA Association	In-N-Out Burger Foundation
Valley Health System	U.S. Bank
County of Riverside EDA CDBG Program	Ray and Gina Ellis
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ABOUT VOICES FOR CHILDREN

Voices for Children (VFC), founded in 1980, transforms the lives of abused children by providing them with volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs). Voices for Children, operating in San Diego County and Riverside County, believes that every child deserves a safe and permanent home, and strives to provide a CASA volunteer to every child in the foster care system who needs one. During the fiscal year that ended June 30, 2016, VFC provided advocacy to 3,050 foster children in San Diego County and reviewed the case file of every one of the 5,000+ children in San Diego County's foster care system. In addition, Voices for Children and its CASA volunteers in Riverside County provided advocacy to 140 children since taking on and rebuilding the CASA program in that County in 2015.

By monitoring their Court cases and through the advocacy of trained volunteer CASAs, VFC ensures that the Judge on each case has current and pertinent information when making vital decisions about a foster child's living situation, visits with siblings, medical and educational needs, and other services. Much more than "mentors," VFC's volunteer CASAs go through extensive training before being sworn in by a Judge, and are in many ways the Court's eyes and ears for the most difficult foster cases. For more information or to inquire about becoming a CASA volunteer in San Diego or Riverside county, visit www.speakupnow.org.

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