

# RLM'S CHARITY SPOTLIGHT

## What is Voices for Children?

Voices for Children (VFC) is a private, nonprofit organization that recruits, trains, and supports Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteers who advocate for the well-being of children in foster care. 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. As the only agency designated by the courts in these counties to provide CASA volunteers, we work towards the ambitious goal of providing the life-changing advocacy of a CASA to every foster child who needs us.

## Who does Voices for Children help?

All children deserve a safe and loving home and the opportunity to thrive. Sadly, thousands of children in our community are denied this foundation when they are abused, neglected, or abandoned by their families. These boys and girls are removed from their homes, placed in group homes or with foster families, and become wards of the court, though they have done nothing wrong. In court, it is up to the judge to determine each child's future – whether they should be reunited with their parents, remain in foster care,



or be adopted. But the foster care system is extremely overwhelmed, and judges and other professionals often do not have the information they would want to make the best decisions for each child. Children can slip through the cracks and be victimized again, lost in an underfunded, overburdened foster care system that cannot provide them with the individual care and attention they need. This is where Voices for Children (VFC) steps in. We make sure foster children received critical support services by providing them with a volunteer CASA, or Court Appointed Special Advocate. CASAs are everyday heroes who are trained by VFC to support children by advocating for their health, well-being, and education.

## How does Voices for Children help and support them?

Our CASAs are the “voice” for boys and girls who cannot speak up for themselves. CASAs have two key objectives: get to know the child in order to understand his or her needs, worries, hopes, and dreams;

and use that information to advocate for the child's best interest to the judge making decisions on the case. During an otherwise chaotic and uncertain time, a CASA can bring consistency and some normalcy to a child's life. CASAs attend children's sporting events and parent-teacher conferences. They facilitate sibling visits when brothers and sisters are not placed in the same home. And they often take children on outings to experience new things – a restaurant, the park, a museum.





While CASAs act as mentors and friends for the vulnerable children they serve, their primary role is even more serious. They are advocates who can effect real change in a child's life. Aside from their time spent with the child, CASAs communicate with the relevant stakeholders – teachers, doctors, lawyers, biological families, social workers, and caregivers. With the knowledge they glean, they request important services for a child, such as counseling, tutoring, physical therapy, or medical services. At critical junctures in the case, they submit reports to the court, upon which dependency judges depend to make important decisions regarding health, education, well being, and permanent home placement.

### **How is Voices for Children different from other like organizations?**

The role of a CASA is unlike any other volunteer experience. While CASAs often build a relationship with their case child

and serve as a mentor, the volunteer's primary role is as advocate. After being trained by VFC, CASAs are sworn in as Officers of the Court and can effect real change in a child's life through their advocacy. They may hold educational rights and play an integral role in a child's education; they are often the only consistent person in a child's life as social workers, homes, and schools change; and they always have the opportunity to submit recommendations to the judge making critical decisions about the child's future.

In California, only one organization is designated by the courts to operate the CASA program in each county. Since 1980, VFC has grown to become one of the most successful CASA programs in the United States, ranked in the Top 3 out of nearly 1,000 programs. In just three years since beginning to serve youth in Riverside County, we are now serving more than 300 children in the region.

### **What are the greatest ongoing challenges facing Voices for Children?**

Thousands of children spend time in Riverside County foster care each year. It is Voices for Children's vision to provide a CASA to every one of those children who need a voice. In order to do so, we need many more caring members of our community to step up and volunteer to become CASAs, as well as others who will financially support the important work they do. Next year, we will need more than 250 volunteers to serve our children.

### **What does the future hold for Voices for Children?**

Last year, more than 220 CASA volunteers dedicated 8,000+ hours to advocating for children in foster care in Riverside County. Based on their example of compassion and commitment, the future looks bright. But we need more help. In order to continue increasing the number of children who are assigned advocates, we need men and



women to become CASAs, community members to make financial gifts to support our children, and we need everyone's help to spread the word.

**Tell my readers something interesting or something they probably don't know about issues facing the children you work with here in Riverside today.**

Children who have experienced trauma develop differently than children who haven't. National Research on childhood trauma, including Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), has shown that trauma has long-term effects on a child's brain development, impulse control,

and even immune systems. Children in the foster care system who have been abused, neglected, or abandoned have the added challenge of dealing with this trauma without their parents or a caring adult – until they are matched with a CASA. Through our training program, CASA volunteers learn about child development, domestic violence, substance abuse, and other topics that help them support children facing the effects of trauma. Above all, a CASA is a positive, consistent adult presence in a child's life – someone they can count on when everyone and everything else is uncertain.

**How can readers of Riverside Living Magazine get involved and help?**

Consider if the role of a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) is right for you. In order to become a CASA, you must be 21 or older and willing to commit approximately 10-15 hours a month to the case. If you want to learn more, sign up to attend one of our volunteer information sessions on our website at [www.speakupnow.org](http://www.speakupnow.org) or by contacting [rvolunteer@speakupnow.org](mailto:rvolunteer@speakupnow.org). We hold information sessions in Riverside every month.

If you're not able to volunteer as a CASA, but you would still like to help, you can make a donation to provide advocacy to children and youth in foster care. For every \$2,000 we raise, we can provide a CASA volunteer to a child for an entire year. You can make a secure, online donation by visiting [www.speakupnow.org](http://www.speakupnow.org) and clicking the blue "Donate" button.

Help us spread the word! If you are involved with a community organization, service club, business, or other group, consider inviting a staff member from Voices for Children to share about the inspirational work of our CASA volunteers.

**What's the best way for our caring residents to reach Voices for Children for more information?**

You can learn more about Voices for Children by visiting [www.speakupnow.org](http://www.speakupnow.org), by emailing [info@speakupnow.org](mailto:info@speakupnow.org), or by calling 951-472-9301.