



Components of VFC's CASA Program for Foster Children



- Recruitment of New Volunteers:** Maintaining and increasing VFC's volunteer corps of CASAs requires substantial investment in recruitment marketing and volunteer screening. Recent recruitment efforts include a strategic plan of branding messages, targeted collateral, increased community presentations and networking, street banners and billboards, earned media in newspapers and magazines, and paid advertising. Our volunteers typically commit to at least 18 months' service although most stay longer.
- Advocate University—Volunteer Training & Continuing Education:** VFC's "Advocate University" prepares volunteers for their responsibilities as CASAs. Provided free of charge to the volunteers, this intensive program includes 35+ hours of formal training in subjects ranging from Dependency Law, Courtroom Procedures, Education and the Foster Child, Writing a Court Report, Building Relationships, Substance Abuse, and Teen Issues. VFC staff, foster care professionals, and other professionals teach the classes, which include case studies, mock court hearings, and more. We combine classroom instruction with online coursework so that trainees can conduct some of their training from home via a secure website. In FY2018-19, at least 9 sessions will be held over twelve months. We also offer regular and high-quality "Continuing Education" classes for CASAs to hone their skills and extend their education about the issues affecting foster children.

- **CASA Case Management:** This is the largest component of Voices for Children, and the heart of the program. Our CASAs (1,337 served in FY2017-18) give invaluable assistance to both the court system and their individual case children. As sworn Officers of the Court, CASAs are empowered to research a child's situation so they can provide the Court with thorough and balanced recommendations of what is best for the child, via written reports and court appearances. VFC Advocacy Supervisors each oversee approximately 45 CASAs and guide them through the Court's complexities, developing a case plan for each child, assisting with advocacy and case management, and helping find resources and services for the children. VFC and its professional staff monitor the CASAs in myriad ways, including editing court reports, accompanying CASAs to court and case conferences, and as backup in case of a child emergency.
- **Education of Foster Children – CASA Educational Services:** VFC CASAs often assume the educational rights of their school-aged case children. Poor performance in school is especially common among these children because their frequent moves between group and foster homes cause them to change schools, sometimes several times a year, leading to skill gaps and missing credits. One study has shown that each school transfer sets back a foster child academically by 4 to 6 months. CASAs with educational rights may advocate for Individual Education Program (IEPs), tutoring or other additional support services that will help the child be more successful in school.
- **Infants & Toddlers Program (ITP):** This specialty of the CASA Program, launched in 2011, seeks to give infants and toddlers permanency before the children experience the crippling physical, emotional, and mental negative outcomes that are sadly typical for these youngest ones in the foster system. With a CASA on the case, infants and toddlers are less likely to re-enter the system due to a recurrence of abuse, as so often happens. The thorough and focused advocacy of ITP CASAs can help to ensure a healthy, nurturing home environment, whether by advocating for services for the parents seeking reunification or for the identification of an adoptive home should reunification be unsuccessful.
- **Early Assignment and Intervention:** Voices for Children now assigns CASAs to foster children much earlier in the dependency process. Our goal is to ensure permanency (through adoption, reunification, or guardianship) for more children through early intervention, thus avoiding the very negative outcomes typical for children in long-term foster care. As a result of our early involvement, VFC is now able to assess the need for a CASA for every child who enters foster care as a VFC staff member is stationed in the courtroom triaging the cases in real time. Our matching team is then able to assign a CASA to these cases immediately upon their entry to foster care.
- **Extended Foster Care (EFC):** This program is focused on foster youth in their late teens—those who are preparing to “age out” of foster care, or taking advantage of the California law that has extended care to age 21 (as long as the youth are in school or employed). CASAs may continue to advocate for youth opting to take advantage of this program. CASAs can provide a critical bridge as these young people transition into adulthood. They can help with financial management, educational issues such as college applications, job interviews, and so much more.
- **Case Assessment Program (CAP):** In addition to providing CASAs to as many children as possible, through CAP staff and volunteers, VFC assesses and prioritizes the case files of each of the approximately 4,000 children in San Diego's foster care system. They also match children to CASA volunteers. Our staff and volunteers research referrals and prepare thousands of written reports annually – evaluating, updating, and prioritizing the children's cases. This is a critical service for the judicial system, to help ensure the most at-risk children get swift and proper attention, and that no child falls through the cracks of an overburdened, underfunded foster care system.

- **Case Liaison Program (CLP):** The Case Liaison's role is to support CASAs and VFC staff in the courtroom; attend, monitor, and gather information for every hearing for which a CASA is not currently assigned; interact with the judges and professionals to maintain and further VFC's reputation; make referrals for CASAs; and to advocate for children who do not have an immediate need for a CASA. In FY2017-18, our staff Case Liaisons served 825 children with advocacy.
- **Juvenile Justice Advocacy Pilot Program:** It is a sad statistic that many boys and girls in the foster care system, who have been victimized by unimaginable mistreatment by their own families, have also been convicted of violating the law themselves, and are at the greatest disposition for spending their lives in and out of juvenile detention and ultimately the adult justice system. A new grant is allowing us to serve youth in the juvenile justice system, the majority of whose families have a history with Child Welfare Services-who have committed minor offenses and would greatly benefit from the intervention and support of a CASA.