

## **Voices for Children**

### **CASA Volunteer Information Packet**

Voices for Children believes that every child deserves a safe and permanent home. To that end, we work to provide a trained CASA volunteer to every abused, abandoned, or neglected youth who needs one. **Currently, we have over 100 youth waiting for an advocate.**

Becoming a CASA volunteer requires no previous experience, just a desire to advocate for a child in foster care. Our volunteers come from all walks of life and each one brings tremendous value to the youth they are matched with. Because of the unique nature of this advocacy work and the personal connection to a foster child, many CASA volunteers find that their service is the experience of a lifetime.

In this packet you will find critical information about your commitment to become a CASA volunteer. Please review this information and reach out to a staff person if you have any questions.

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## **About Voices for Children**

### *Our Beginnings*

As a law student in 1980, Kathryn Ashworth had always held an active role in serving her community. After volunteering with the Junior League, Ashworth became aware of the critical need for increased child abuse prevention and advocacy in San Diego County. The more she learned, she wondered what improvements could be made to better serve these vulnerable children.

In 1983, while attending a meeting of Judges in California, Ashworth learned of the Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program model. This format utilized trained and supervised volunteers, known as CASAs, who were paired with a specific foster child or sibling set. A CASA volunteer could provide much-needed resources and support to the child in areas such as education, healthcare, and personal development by advocating directly to the judge who was making decisions for that child's future.

Ashworth recruited her friend Elizabeth Brainard Bacon and together they brought this new CASA model to San Diego County. Later that same year, Ashworth graduated with the first training class of Voices for Children CASAs. To this day, the Voices for Children team continues to recruit, train, and support volunteers in advocating for local foster youth. Today, Voices for Children is consistently ranked in the top three programs nationwide.

### *Expansion to Riverside County*

In June 2015, the Riverside County CASA program was launched. After just five years of service the Riverside County program has advocated on behalf of 434 children, opened field offices in the cities of Riverside, Murrieta, and Palm Desert, and is one of the fastest-growing CASA programs in the state.

With both San Diego and Riverside Counties under its purview, Voices for Children has the opportunity to provide CASAs to 13% of all foster youth in California.



### *Juvenile Justice Program*

In 2015, the California legislature enacted laws permitting CASA advocacy for justice-involved youth. Understanding that youth living in foster care and youth involved in the juvenile justice system share many of the same needs, we applied for and received funding to begin providing CASA advocacy to these youth. Since launching in 2017, the program has served 108 youth and has become the largest juvenile justice CASA program in the nation.

### *Be a Part of VFC's Legacy of Service*

As one of nearly 1,000 certified CASA programs across the nation, Voices for Children remains firm in its mission of improving the lives of abused, abandoned, and neglected youth. We work every day to fulfill our vision and provide a CASA volunteer to every vulnerable child who needs one.

**Today we're asking you to join thousands of caring individuals in San Diego and Riverside Counties by becoming a CASA volunteer. With your impact, a child who has experienced abuse, neglect, or abandonment can receive vital support and resources that will make all the difference in their lives.**

## **The CASA Role**

CASAs act as fact-finders for the judges, providing them with information that they may never get otherwise. CASAs gather information from Court documents, social workers' files, and other records. They also speak with the child, family members, school officials, health care providers, and professionals involved in the child's life. CASAs use this information, as well as firsthand observations, to advocate for the child in Court, school, and 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 each child's individual needs are met. CASAs visit with their case children at least once a month. This provides the children with consistency and allows the CASAs to better understand their needs, as well as get to know the children themselves. Some CASAs also build and maintain positive, trusting relationships with their case children, much like mentors.

### *Working with Professionals on the Case*

Foster care is made up of many hardworking and caring individuals, but it is also a overburdened bureaucracy. Professionals within the foster care system are tasked with an overwhelming number of cases, making it difficult to know every case detail.

In addition to working with the Social Worker, Attorney, and Judge you will be collaborating with other professionals on the case to ensure the needs of the child are met. That might include following up with a doctor, attending a parent-teacher conference, or it could mean reaching out to a community partner to secure funding for summer camp. There are many different ways the CASA can partner with and support professionals on the case as you work together for the best interests of the child.

CASAs typically have just one case at a time and are often the only person not paid to be in the child's life. This allows you to get to know the child in a unique way. So while the professionals can help the judge know what the children need to be safe, it's the CASAs that often help the judge know what they need to thrive.

## **Eligibility Requirements**

To become a CASA, you must meet the following qualifications:

- Be at least 21 years old
- Have a valid U.S.-issued driver license from the state in which you legally reside and proof of insurance
- Have completed a minimum of two years licensed driving experience in the U.S. (permit experience does not apply)
- Have reliable access to a vehicle (ride share and public transportation cannot be used to meet this requirement)
- Clear all background checks
  - Please note not all convictions or charges are disqualifiers. If you have any questions about your personal history, please reach out to a staff person.
- Clear a DMV record check
  - Your driving record must be free of any major moving violations in the past four years. Additionally, if you have had more than one at-fault accident, minor moving violation, or nonmoving violation in the past three years you might not be eligible
  - If you have lived outside of the U.S. in the past 10 years, you may need to obtain an international background check before starting training
- Must not have a conflict of interest. You may have a conflict if any of the following apply to you.
  - You work, volunteer, or donate to an agency that serves foster children or their families.
  - You hold an active foster parent license, or are currently applying for one.
  - You are in the process of adopting a child through San Diego or Riverside Counties
  - You previously had, or currently have involvement with Child Welfare Services
  - You are a relative of a youth currently in the foster care system (not limited to San Diego and Riverside Counties)

- You are a partner or relative of a Voices for Children staff member.

Please note this is not an exhaustive list. If you feel you may have a personal conflict of interest, please speak with a staff person as soon as possible.

### *CASA Commitments*

Becoming a CASA requires no previous experience, but all CASA volunteers are required to make the following commitments:

- A minimum of 18 months of volunteer service which begins after completing Advocate University
- Spend an average of 10-15 hours per month on your CASA duties
- Visit case child(ren) once per month. While all CASA activities are currently done remotely, we still require all CASAs to check in with their youth on a monthly basis.
- Attend several daytime meetings each month (type and frequently depends on assignment)
- Attend all required court hearings. These occur approximately once every six months
- Be willing to drive throughout San Diego county
- Maintain all Voices for Children Policies

## **The Role of your Advocacy Supervisor**

While you will have the most contact with your case youth (or sibling group), you will also be assigned to a Voices for Children staff person, called an Advocacy Supervisor, to ensure that you have the resources you need to be successful.

### *Communication with your Supervisor*

Before starting on your first case you will meet with your Supervisor (currently over Zoom) to go through the background of the case and the first steps you will need to complete. From there you will stay in contact with your Supervisor at least once each week to provide case updates and ask questions. Once you both feel more comfortable on the case, typically after a month or two, you will be required to stay in contact with them at least once per month. However, if at any time you need support, have questions, or are looking for resources you can reach out to your Supervisor for assistance.

### *Getting Matched to a Supervisor*

During your interview with staff, we will discuss your work and communication styles, so that we can best match you to a Supervisor with whom you'll be successful. Since you will be working closely with this staff person we want to ensure you have a successful working relationship.

### *Support*

We understand that your work as a CASA may include time outside of typical business hours. While we encourage you to contact your assigned Supervisor whenever possible, we do have a team of staff that is able to provide support should your assigned Supervisor not be available. This includes an Emergency Cell Phone for emergencies that happen outside of business hours.

## **Critical Policies**

Voices for Children has many policies in place to protect both our CASAs and our youth. It is very important that you follow these policies in order to maintain a positive experience for everyone involved. Some important policies to know up front are:

**Confidentiality:** All information about your case child is confidential. You may not discuss anything about your case with friends or family. You can only discuss your case details with Voices for Children staff, the child's social worker, the child's attorney, and the judge.

**Professional Boundaries:** You are not allowed to bring your case children home or to your place of employment. Additionally, you are not allowed to introduce them to any of your friends or family.

**Driving:** You may only transport the case children that you have been matched with. If you are working with a sibling group that has other CASAs on the case, you need to coordinate with them to get the full group together. If your child is under the age of 5, you may not transport them in your car. Instead you will arrange with the caregiver to visit them at their placement.

**Spending Limit:** Should you choose to spend money while on an outing, this money is not reimbursable by Voices for Children and we have a strict spending limit of \$20 per outing if you are matched to a single child or \$40 per outing if you're matched to a sibling group. This is to maintain equality and to prevent setting unreasonable expectations for caregivers or parents once the child is reunited.

**Religion:** We strictly prohibit CASAs from discussing spirituality, religion, or non-religious alternatives with you case children. This includes discussing your affiliation with any related groups, such as faith centers and community groups. It is also against policy to transport your case children to any place of worship, including their own. As a

representative of the court there are legal requirements that we must follow to maintain a separation of Church and State. While CASAs may help guide their case youth through some difficult situations, religion and spirituality are deeply personal decisions and it is not your role to influence this part of their lives.

**Non-Discrimination:** Voices for Children is an inclusive organization and proudly works with all people regardless of race, national origin, citizenship, ancestry, culture, age, medical condition, physical or mental disability, religious or spiritual creed, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or any other characteristic protected by the law. We ask that our CASAs are open to working with children, caregivers, and professionals of all backgrounds. You will meet people with very different life experiences than your own, and we require that you remain open minded in all situations.

### **Advocate University (AU) Training**

Before you begin working with your case youth, you will need to complete our Advocate University training program. We host 9 training sessions each year, with options for evening or Saturday sessions. Our upcoming schedules will be provided separately. Before moving forward in the application process, please ensure that you can fulfill all of the following requirements during your selected training session.

- Complete 35 hours of training during your selected session
  - These 35 hours are comprised of the following: 21 hours of class (currently conducted via Zoom), approximately 10 hours of pre-recorded videos, and 4 hours of additional assignments including court observation, a practice court report, surveys, and review of the Policies manual.
- Attend two interviews with your Advocacy Supervisor (approximately 30-60 minutes each). All interviews are currently conducted via Zoom.
- Obtain a copy of your driving history from the DMV. Please note: there is a \$2 fee to obtain your California driving history. If you have driving history from other states you may be required to pay additional fees.
- Pass all required background checks. Please note there is a \$15 fee to process your fingerprints. Some forms may require notarization. Voices for Children will reimburse you any notary costs you may incur.

*Supplies Fee:* In addition to these requirements, you will be asked to pay a fee of \$50 to help cover the costs incurred by Voices for Children during training. We understand that during these unusual circumstances this may be a hardship. Please notify the Training Coordinator if you would like to request a waiver.

## **Ongoing Training & Support**

Once you have been matched to a case you will have many questions and may want to learn more about specific aspects of advocating for youth in care. Voices for Children provides ongoing support and training opportunities throughout the year.

### *Continuing Education Classes*

Continuing Education classes are seminar format trainings intended to provide participants with detailed knowledge of a specific topic. Topics rotate, but have previously included: Healthy Boundaries, Education, Adoption, Supporting Trans and LGBT Youth, Developmental Screenings, Disability Rights & Resources, Advocating for Transitional Age Youth, and more. Classes are currently being held monthly via Zoom.

### *Small Groups*

Small Groups are discussion based meetings intended to provide an open forum for CASAs to discuss case successes and brainstorm solutions to case challenges. Small groups are currently being held via Zoom several times each month.

### *At Home Learning Opportunities*

In addition to these groups, many books and movies can help facilitate your learning. For a list of approved at home learning opportunities, please reach out to your Advocacy Supervisor once you are matched to a case.

### *Continuing Education Requirements*

To help maintain a current understanding of the foster care system and our advocacy work, you are required to complete 12 hours of continuing education credits annually. These can be fulfilled by utilizing the above resources.

## **4 Steps to Becoming a CASA**

To become a CASA volunteer you need to complete the following steps:

### **Learn: Attend a Volunteer Information Session**

We host two information sessions each month and you must attend full session prior to interviewing with us. Each session lasts approximately 90 minutes and is currently being conducted via Zoom. During the session we will provide an overview of Voices for Children's work, the specific role of a CASA, and the process to becoming a volunteer. It also gives you the opportunity to hear directly from, and ask questions to, a current CASA.

### **Apply: Complete an Application & Interview**

#### *Complete a Volunteer Application*

You may complete the volunteer application before or after attending your information session. The application will take approximately 1 hour to complete and asks basic questions about your background and interests. You can access the volunteer application on our website.

#### *Participate in an Interview*

Once you have completed the application and attended an information session you will be invited to schedule an interview.

Your interview will last approximately 90 minutes and all interviews are currently being conducted via Zoom. The interview provides an opportunity for our Program staff to discuss with you, in depth, your background, interests, schedule, and skills. While we do not require specific training to become a CASA, we do screen all volunteers to make sure they are able to complete the basic requirements and are a good fit for the role. Please treat this interview with the same professionalism you will use while on your case.

**Train: Complete Advocate University**

Before you begin working with your case youth, you will need to complete 35 hours of training through our Advocate University training program. Please see page 10 of this packet for full details about our training program

**Advocate: Get Matched to a Case**

After completing all of your requirements, you are ready to get started on your case! We have several staff dedicated to matching you to a case where you will be the most successful. While you always have the right to refuse a case, we ask that you remain as open minded as possible. Our staff are looking to set everyone up for success, including you – our wonderful volunteers!

### **Other Ways to Get Involved**

We understand that becoming a CASA is a big commitment. If you do not feel ready to make that commitment, here are some other ways that you can support our work.

#### *Tell a Friend*

Year over year, our largest source of referrals is from word-of-mouth. If you know someone that might be a great CASA volunteer, please share this information with them.

#### *Make a Donation*

As a 501(c)3 non-profit organization, we appreciate all donations. If you are interested in financially supporting our work please visit our website to learn more.

#### *Attend an Event*

Throughout the year we host several events, each with a different focus. Please see our website's event page for registration details.

**Thank you for caring about the foster youth of San Diego County and stepping forward to make a difference.** We appreciate your thoughtful consideration of our CASA Program and we look forward to seeing you again soon!

If you have any questions, or need additional information about becoming a CASA volunteer, please reach out to us!

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