



VOICES FOR CHILDREN

THE VOICE

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SPRING 2021

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"IT'S EASY TO SAY, 'It's not my child, not my community, not my problem.' Then there are those who SEE THE NEED and RESPOND. I consider those people my HEROES."

— FRED ROGERS

OUR MISSION

Voices for Children transforms the lives of abused, abandoned, or neglected children by providing them with trained volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs).

OUR VISION

Voices for Children believes that every child deserves a safe and permanent home and, to that end, will provide a trained CASA volunteer to every abused, abandoned, or neglected child who needs one, and advocate to improve the lives of children in the foster care system.



MESSAGE FROM OUR CEO

Dear Friends,

Vaccine rollouts. The reopening of our economy. A return to in-person education. The ability to begin gathering again with friends and family. We are encouraged by all of these signs of hope for 2021 and beyond.

Amidst this progress, we are mindful each day of the nearly 8,000 abused, neglected, and abandoned children who will spend time this year in foster care across San Diego and Riverside Counties. For most, isolation, struggles with mental health, COVID-related learning loss, and uncertain home placements and futures continue to be a regular part of everyday life. Now, more than ever, these children need to know that they matter and that someone believes in them.

That's where our Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteers step in. Through unparalleled dedication, dogged advocacy, and caring attention, CASAs are showing children that they matter. One CASA drives 260 miles round trip to spend time with her youth who is living in a group home. Another CASA was the only constant presence when her CASA youth experienced 14 different placements over five years. Another CASA, thanks to his weekly hikes with his 8-year-old CASA child, immediately recognized when the boy was struggling in school and jumped in quickly to coordinate educational support, resources, and supplies.

As one of our long-time CASAs recently shared, "It takes time to earn [a child's] trust. You have to show up. Every. Single. Time." And that is exactly what our CASAs do. It is a special honor for us at Voices for Children to support nearly 1,400 volunteers this year who are showing children they are cared for and valued.

One critical way in which we demonstrate to children that we believe in them is by supporting their educational progress. Across the nation, students have been impacted by school closures and the move to distance learning. In the article on page four, we shine a light on the educational challenges faced by children in foster care. Importantly, we hope you'll learn more about how our CASAs play a critical role in advocating for children to ensure they have the resources they need to progress and thrive in school.

As we reflect on the past year, a constant theme is gratitude. Hundreds of community members have chosen to become CASA volunteers. The generosity of our supporters has enabled us to continue our work without missing a beat, ensuring that the vulnerable children we serve know that they are our priority. In the pages that follow, we feature several of our amazing youth, volunteers, and supporters, and we hope you will be inspired by their stories.

From all of us at Voices for Children, thank you for your ongoing support for the children we serve!

With our sincere appreciation,

Kelly Capen Douglas, Esq.
President & CEO



CASA SPOTLIGHTS:

Honoring Parents & Grandparents

With Mother's Day on May 9, 2021, and Father's Day on June 20, 2021, we would like to commemorate all the amazing parents and grandparents who make time in their bustling schedules to support youth in foster care by volunteering as Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs).



CASA Lily was born and raised in Los Angeles to parents who immigrated to the U.S. from El Salvador. After serving in the Navy and enrolling in school, she began a family of her own, becoming a mother to three daughters and a son. She first learned about Voices for Children (VFC) when she noticed VFC banners along the road. Later, when a VFC announcement played on the radio, she took it as a sign. Lily completed her CASA training in 2019 and was paired with a set of siblings, an older sister in her late teens and a younger sister who primarily spoke Spanish. Thanks to Lily's love for children, her bilingual abilities, and the resources available to her through VFC, she felt equipped to support both girls.

Lily found that her experience as a mother offered some preparation for her role as a CASA. "Being a parent requires patience," Lily shared; "That helped me in being a CASA because patience is needed to get a call back, to hear from providers, social workers, caregivers, school officials, and other important team members." She also added that the flexibility and loving nature that comes from parenthood further helped her in supporting her case youth.

With four kids at home and college courses to complete, Lily already had a full plate, but she made it a priority to manage her time, engage in regular self-care, and strike a healthy balance between her commitments. "My experience as a CASA has been so rewarding [...] In a little under two years, I feel [my assigned children] and I have encountered and overcome so much together. We've laughed, we've cried, we've played at the park, we've played at the beach and sang out loud in the car." Today, Lily's eldest case youth is a Non-Minor Dependent (NMD) in foster care, and her youngest has been reunified with her biological mother. Lily continues to keep in contact with both.

CASA Michael was born into foster care in the 1960s and was the youngest of three adopted children. As an adult, he'd heard VFC announcements on the radio for years and finally answered the call. He found that his previous experience of being an involved parent to his own children — including participating in the PTA and serving on boards of organizations that supported children — gave him a boost in his role as a CASA, though he acknowledged that there was much to learn about foster care.

"The best strategy I found was to embrace the unexpected and move through it with positivity," shared Michael, "My case youth, as well as all my other kids, were brought into my life for a reason. All I can do is my best."

Michael's assigned youth was in his late teens when they were paired together, and the young man was in need of educational, emotional, and medical support. Michael worked with professionals to ensure that his case child received all the resources he'd need to thrive, and together they strengthened their bond through outings and conversations. Today, the young man is living in a safer, more attentive placement after Michael advocated for a placement change.

"My experience as a CASA has been very emotional. [...] These youth have already had a rough time. [...] My greatest joy has been serving my case youth and seeing his growth over the past 3.5 years." Since the young man's case closed, Michael has continued to stay in touch and hopes to connect in person once it is safe to do so.

Thank you to Lily and Michael for your invaluable advocacy, and thank you to all our CASAs who have answered the call to speak up for children in our community.

From left to right: Lily with her family; Lily's case children at a park; Michael's case youth at an auto show the pair attended prior to the pandemic; Michael with his grandchild.

Distance Learning & Foster Care

Research warns of learning loss, yet CASAs help children overcome barriers.

Made-up playground games, reaching the highest point the swing set will allow, excitedly raising your hand in class, passing notes, spirit days: our memories of school evoke such a strong sense of nostalgia. For students of all ages, the past year's school experience has been unlike that of any before. Children across the country have been frustrated by the shift to remote learning that physical distancing guidelines have required, and those who have been able to return in person are adjusting to new and often cumbersome restrictions. For some children, though, the transition to distance learning has compounded challenges they faced before the pandemic.

Children in foster care experience many challenges related to their education. When children are removed from their homes due to abuse or neglect, they must change schools frequently. Across California, more than a third of children in foster care move to three or more placements during just their first 12 months in care¹ and school changes often coincide with each new placement. From issues with transferring records to a general sense of instability to new classes, teacher, and classmates, each move presents possible barriers to learning.

Children in foster care are one group of students who have been particularly affected by distance learning. In fact, education experts are concerned that many children in foster care have not had access to education during the pandemic. Bellwether Education Partners estimates that 25 percent of marginalized students — including those living in foster care — may not have had access to distance learning at all.²

Even students who have been able to access the tools and technology needed to complete distance learning assignments may find the new platforms challenging. Marsha Carey, a Voices for Children (VFC) assistant program manager in Riverside County, was a middle-school teacher for 35 years before joining the staff at VFC. Carey empathizes with the challenges both students and teachers face. Reflecting on her years of experience, she stated, “a child’s body language often revealed the extent in which the child understood the subject matter. Sometimes a moment of eye contact between a student and teacher along with a simple nod made all the difference.” She added that virtual learning does not lend itself to that type of interaction between students and teachers.

K-12 students are not the only ones who have found it more complicated to continue their education during the pandemic. Jane Wehrmeister, a VFC senior advocacy supervisor in San Diego County, noted that many young adults in foster care who are preparing for their transition to independent living have decided to pursue employment instead of education, at least in the short term. She said that they plan to “resume their studies when in-person classes become available again.”

Fortunately, the children that VFC serves do not face these challenges alone. Now more than ever, CASAs are supporting children and youth as they navigate distance learning and are ready to assist and support children as in-person learning resumes.

While children in foster care have many professionals involved in their cases, a CASA is uniquely situated to advocate for the educational needs of a child because CASAs are focused on one child or sibling group and because, over time, they often become the most consistent person in that child’s life. CASAs support the children for whom they advocate by monitoring grades, attending school meetings, advocating for special education services if needed, removing barriers to extra-curricular participation, and updating the social worker and the court about unmet educational needs. About 25 percent of CASAs are appointed by the judge to serve as their case child’s educational rights holder in addition to their role as the child’s CASA.

During the pandemic, CASAs have been instrumental in ensuring their case children’s education remains a priority, finding novel ways to advocate on their behalf. CASAs have asked children and caregivers frequently what they need to be successful. CASAs have reported to the court on barriers to educational access exacerbated by the pandemic. CASAs have assisted parents and caregivers with accessing resources and technology so that children of all ages can participate meaningfully in distance learning. And CASAs have helped older youth to identify new strategies to manage their time and assignments.

Education, like many areas of our lives, will undoubtedly change forever due to the pandemic. Voices for Children is committed to supporting CASAs as they

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advocate for children's educational needs now and into the future. During our Advocate University training program and through ongoing continuing education opportunities, CASAs receive tailored education resources to help them be the most effective advocates. In addition, Voices for Children has built productive relationships with the County Offices of Education and local school districts in the communities where our CASAs serve. Through community partnerships and thanks to caring donors, we are able to assist CASAs with meeting tangible needs of our youth, such as technology needs related to education.

As students close out one school year and our communities plan for the next stages of returning to in-person learning, CASAs stand ready to advocate for children's best interests and help to lay a strong educational foundation for our youth. We are immensely grateful for the tireless advocacy CASA volunteers have provided to children in foster care during this unusual time. Those efforts are making a tangible difference in the lives of children today and will continue to impact our community for generations to come.

Overcoming Barriers to Access

CASAs Sylvia and Niza advocate for siblings who come from a family of eight children. The children recently returned home to live with their mother in an agricultural community 30 miles east of Palm Springs. The CASAs, who each advocate for different children in the family, discovered shortly after their appointment that the family was having technical difficulties with their school-issued laptops. The children's mother wanted to help the children, but she did not know how to use a computer, had limited access to transportation, and faced language barriers. The CASAs coordinated with the school to ensure that the laptops were fixed and that the family had access to the internet as well as the books the children needed. Thanks to these dedicated CASA volunteers, these children did not miss any additional days of school.

Getting Back on Track

Jerry is a tenth-grader who has a CASA volunteer assigned to him through San Diego County's innovative Juvenile Justice CASA program, which serves youth who have committed non-violent offenses and have many of the same needs as children in foster care. Jerry demonstrated a willingness to attend school regularly before the pandemic but struggled when his classes transitioned to an online format. As a result, Jerry was not on track to graduate on time and was on the verge of violating his probation. Jerry's CASA spent time talking with him about what might help. The teen confided in his CASA that he had difficulty waking up in the morning, so his CASA mailed him an alarm clock. Jerry's CASA also identified that the prescription for his eyeglasses was not up to date, which made attending virtual classes very difficult. With the help of Voices for Children staff, she was able to secure him new glasses. A few months later, Jerry's school attendance was nearly perfect, his grades were improving, and he successfully completed his probation.

1. *California Child Welfare Indicators Project Reports*, UC Berkeley Center for Social Services Research (Jul. 2019)

2. *Missing in the Margins: Estimating the Scale of the COVID-19 Attendance Crisis*, Bellwether Education (Oct. 2020)

<https://bellwethereducation.org/publication/missing-margins-estimating-scale-covid-19-attendance-crisis>



Riverside County Highlights

Learning How To “Adult” in a Pandemic

CASAs have played a special role supporting children and youth throughout the pandemic. CASA volunteers continue to advocate for young adults who have chosen to participate in California’s Extended Foster Care program. Through the Extended Foster Care program, young people who turn 18 years old while they are living in foster care can choose to remain involved with the foster care system until their 21st birthday to receive support while they work toward education and employment goals. CASAs are assisting these young adults in preparing for life after foster care despite all of the uncertainties they face.

CASA Zoe is an outstanding example of how VFC’s volunteer advocates are supporting young adults during the pandemic. Zoe completed her pre-service training through our virtual Advocate University and now advocates for a determined young woman from Moreno Valley named “Daniela.” Daniela shared with Zoe that she would like to have a catering business one day. Zoe helped the teen write her first résumé, prepare for a job interview, and land her first job at a fast-food restaurant. Daniela is determined to be self-sufficient and continues to devote herself to her education while she is working part time. Recently, Zoe helped her to complete her college financial aid forms.

We are so thankful for all of the ways CASAs are helping older teens and young adults prepare for bright futures in difficult times.



DONOR SPOTLIGHT:

Inland SoCal United Way

The Inland SoCal United Way has been a valued partner in the growth of Voices for Children’s Riverside County program, helping youth in foster care receive the support they need to overcome immense obstacles and live happier, healthier lives in these challenging times. We are so grateful for the investments they have made in the Riverside County CASA program.

Now more than ever, children in foster care need the advocacy of a CASA volunteer. Inland SoCal United Way responded to that need with two generous grants totaling \$29,600 from their COVID-19 fund and their Capacity Building fund. The COVID-19 crisis has created new uncertainties for the children we serve. Children in foster care are experiencing extended time in foster care, delayed reunification with parents, and delayed adoptions. In addition to the COVID-19 grant, VFC received a capacity-building grant in support of Riverside County’s Transitional Age Youth (TAY) Program, a program which served 138 youth between the ages of 16–21 last year.



Inland SoCal United Way

PARTNER SPOTLIGHT: KARL FULLER, ESQ.

Voices for Children is proud to work alongside dedicated community partners who invest their time into improving the lives of children in the foster care system. Professionals on a child's case work independently and collaboratively towards improving the life of that youth. One such professional is Karl Fuller, who serves on the Juvenile Defense Panel (JDP) as an attorney on juvenile dependency and delinquency cases in Riverside County.

Fuller's involvement with the juvenile dependency system started long before he was an attorney. In the early 2000s, Fuller served in a number of positions for the Pechanga tribe; first as the director of an environmental grant program, and later as a paralegal and Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) coordinator. While defending the tribe in juvenile court, he became acquainted with members of JDP. In 2015, he was contacted by JDP to join the panel.

For Fuller, advocating on behalf of children is simply instinct. When asked about his motivation, Fuller noted that his drive to improve the lives of children is natural and comes from within. For attorneys representing children in foster care, the goal is to advocate for the child's best interests so that they remain safe, protected, and well cared for. This can be a challenge, however, when serving dozens of children at once. Fuller noted he may oversee up to 100 children at any given time.

"The first time I became truly impressed with CASA was when I got a report from the volunteer about my kid. There was so much useful and insightful information there [...] I was so happy to get the real story about my kid," Fuller shared. Unlike professionals who oversee many cases at a time, Court Appointed Special Advocate volunteers, or CASAs, are paired with one child or sibling set. This allows more time to dedicate to understanding a child's personal challenges, situation, and needs. Fuller continued, "There are so many gaps in the system, but when there is a CASA appointed, it takes so much of the stress off me because I know there is someone there for my kid."

Fuller and other attorneys in Riverside and San Diego Counties share a common goal with CASA volunteers: the best outcomes for youth in foster care. "My job as an attorney is to advocate for the child in all sorts of ways [...] Sometimes, the only solution needed is for a CASA to be appointed. Do you know how liberating that is? Instead of my having to argue for a solution, the solution is the actual CASA themselves, because they will do whatever they can to help."

Thank you to Fuller for his dedicated service to children in Riverside County. You can learn more about the Juvenile Defense Panel and their work at www.juveniledefensepanel.com.



WITH GRATITUDE

Voices for Children would like to thank the many foundations, corporations and government agencies who have provided COVID specific support to help children in foster care in the early days and throughout the pandemic. Thank you to The San Diego Foundation, the UPS Foundation, Sempra, The Rose Foundation, the In-N-Out Burger Foundation, The JEM Project, the San Diego County Board of Supervisors, and the Judicial Council of California for your incredible generosity. In a year of tremendous uncertainty and difficulty for the children in foster care that we serve, your gifts have made all the difference. Thank you to the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services for your incredible flexibility in the earliest days of the pandemic. We are grateful to you all.

MG Properties Group: A True Philanthropic Partner

MG Properties Group has supported Voices for Children since 2015. The team has cultivated a workplace culture of generosity and camaraderie through giving opportunities at every level of the company. Not only does the company underwrite sponsorships for two of VFC's signature events, Starry Starry Night and the Fostering Hope Golf Tournament, but five MG Properties Group employees volunteer their off-work hours as dedicated CASAs. In addition, the company raises thousands of dollars through fun staff activities and competitive events ranging from chili cook-offs to 5K walk/runs, March Madness celebrations, and more. But MG Properties Group goes a step further, recruiting their generous vendors and business partners to also join campaigns to help raise money for Voices for Children's mission.

Jenny McKenna, Director of Culture & Philanthropy explains the company's philosophy. "We are proud to support human services causes including foster youth, the homeless, and the hungry. We are continually inspired by the generosity of our CEO, Mark Gleiberman, his wife Hanna, and family. Their dedication to Voices for Children aids in team members' understanding of the MG Properties Group mission of 'enriching lives through better communities.'"

MG Properties Group specializes in the acquisition, development, rehabilitation, and management of apartment communities throughout the western United States. With more than 650 employees, the company supports CASA programs across the west. MG Properties group is a 2-time winner of the Good Neighbor Award, given by the Southern California Apartment Association, which honors companies for going above and beyond in their communities.

Thank you to MG Properties Group for your commitment to children in San Diego and Riverside Counties!



Above: MG Properties staff at various events supporting Voices for Children and CASAs

Photos were taken prior to COVID-19 restrictions.

Your Gift Could Be Matched

Voices for Children is proud to partner with Focusing Philanthropy to support our CASA program. A special matching campaign benefitting VFC's San Diego County program runs through June 30 and a new campaign will be launched to support our Riverside County program on May 1. For every \$2 raised by Voices for Children, Focusing Philanthropy will generously donate \$1 until the campaign's goals are reached. VFC will use the funds raised to recruit, train, and support dedicated volunteer advocates for children in foster care.

To learn more, contact Rebecca Rader at rebeccar@speakupnow.org or 858-598-2211.

*Your Donation Can
Serve Even More
Vulnerable Children*

**Focusing Philanthropy
Is Matching Gifts**



Legal Community Supports CASA Advocacy Through New Giving Circle

The Amicus Circle at Voices for Children is comprised of law firms, law schools, legal associations, and other legal support service organizations who have expressed their commitment to improving the lives of children who have experienced abuse and neglect. Through the support of Amicus Circle members, Voices for Children is able to recruit, train, and provide ongoing professional support to CASA volunteers as they advocate for a better future for our community's children.

AMICUS CIRCLE MEMBERS — 2021

		
		
		
		

To learn how your organization can join our next class of Amicus Circle members and receive the benefits of membership, contact Rebecca Rader at rebeccar@speakupnow.org or **858-598-2211**.

Board Welcomes New Members

Six community leaders were recently elected to the Board of Directors for Voices for Children. On January 21, The Honorable Ana España administered the Oath of Confidentiality to the new members, an oath that is taken by each of our staff, CASAs, and board members, which confirms our commitment to uphold the confidentiality, safety, and best interest of the children we serve. We are honored to welcome these individuals to our board and are grateful for their commitment to children in our community.

Luisa Ayala, *Partner, Altmann Ayala Realty Team*
Andy Christopher, *Lead Advisor, Dowling & Yahnke*
Jenny Li-Hochberg, *Former Attorney, Community Volunteer*
Mia Kelly, Esq., *Senior Counsel, Tyson & Mendes*
Katherine Nicoletti, *Chief of Staff to the Chief Financial Officer, Intel Corporation*
Laura Roos, *Partner, Moss Adams LLP*

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Riverside County — FY2020–2021

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Events

JUDGES' LUNCHEON

Join Voices for Children on Tuesday, June 1, at 12:00 p.m. for our first virtual Judges' Luncheon. Tune in for a unique opportunity to learn more about the foster care system and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic directly from Juvenile Court judges. Joining us will be The Honorable Ana España, Presiding Judge for San Diego Superior Court's Juvenile Division, along with a panel of judges who work tirelessly on behalf of children in the foster care system. The panel will be moderated by the Honorable Lorna A. Alksne, Presiding Judge of the San Diego Superior Court. We also will hear from a CASA about their experience advocating for the rights and well-being of children in the juvenile dependency system.

FREE & OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

REGISTRATION:
WWW.SPEAKUPNOW.ORG/JUDGES-LUNCHEON

Thank you to our 2021 Amicus Circle members who are generous sponsors of the 2021 Judges' Luncheon.

FROM THE BENCH

"CASAs are extremely helpful to the court in our role as decision makers."

—The Honorable Laura Birkmeyer

"[CASAs] bring this child to life in a report that I otherwise wouldn't have."

—The Honorable Gary M. Bubis

Fostering Hope Golf Classic

On May 17, 2021, Voices for Children will hold its 28th annual Fostering Hope Golf Classic to support our Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program. We are grateful to our presenting sponsors George Lai and Katie and Dan Sullivan and to Co-Chairs Rolf Benirschke, David Bialis, Katie Sullivan, Bill Sailer, and Dale Yahnke for helping make this event possible. Hosted at a private country club in La Jolla, players will tee off for an 18-hole tournament, followed by an outdoor cocktail reception and awards ceremony where guests will learn more about our CASA program and support the children we serve.

Thank you to our generous sponsors!

PRESENTING SPONSORS

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Top (from left to right): Co-chair Katie Sullivan (2nd from left) with foursome at 2018 golf classic. **Bottom (from left to right):** Co-chairs Dale Yahnke, Bill Sailer, Dave Bialis, and Rolf Benirschke at 2019 golf classic. Photos were taken prior to COVID-19 restrictions.

Speak Up for a Child in Foster Care

Learn more about volunteering and ask questions of a current CASA at an upcoming Volunteer Information Session.

San Diego County

Saturday, May 15
Thursday, May 27
Saturday, June 12
Wednesday, June 30

Riverside County

Tuesday, May 11
Monday, May 17
Friday, May 21
Tuesday, May 25

All information sessions have been moved to an online, virtual format unless otherwise noted on our website.

.....
Sign up today!

Visit
speakupnow.org/volunteer

.....

Real Word Reunion Speakers Panel

On April 27, Voices for Children hosted its second Real Word Reunion Speakers Panel in commemoration of our 40th year of child advocacy in San Diego County. The virtual presentation, led by special guest moderator Maureen Cavanaugh, host of KPBS's Midday Edition, featured a panel of two individuals who spent time in foster care — Josh and Candace — and their Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteers, Tim and Genevieve.

Maureen navigated the panel through a series of insightful questions regarding foster care and the role and impact of CASA volunteers. As former youth in the foster care system, Josh and Candace brought to the table their unique perspectives on what it was like to be separated from family and siblings, and face additional challenges in areas such as education and stability. With CASAs Tim and Genevieve participating, the audience was able to see the heartwarming bond that many youth and their CASAs develop.



The
Real
Word



We were honored to feature such inspiring voices for this Real Word panel, and hope attendees left feeling uplifted and inspired to continue investing in the lives of our community's children. Thank you to our panelists for offering their insights on foster care and the CASA program, and to our special guest moderator, Maureen Cavanaugh, for facilitating a thoughtful conversation.

To view a recording of the Real Word Reunion Speakers Panel with Josh, Tim, Candace, and Genevieve, visit our website at www.speakupnow.org/realword.



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2851 Meadow Lark Drive
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Riverside, CA 92513
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SAVE THE DATE | September 25, 2021

Starry Starry Night

BENEFITING



Save the date to join Voices for Children as we honor, celebrate, and reflect on our 40th year of service in San Diego County. Whether in person or virtual, Starry Starry Night will support the life-changing advocacy of Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteers for our community's most vulnerable children.

Registration will open on July 15. For sponsorship opportunities and more information, please contact Samantha Daum at samanthad@speakupnow.org or 858-598-2261.

All net proceeds from Starry Starry Night 2021 will support Voices for Children's CASA program in San Diego County.

Follow Us!



Voices for Children is active on social media! Like us on Facebook, follow us on Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter, and watch our most recent videos on YouTube.