

RIVERSIDE LAWYER

April 2023 • Volume 73 Number 4

MAGAZINE



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Child Human Trafficking: Protecting Our Most Vulnerable



The Official Publication of the Riverside County Bar Association

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Pictured on cover - Volunteers for the RCBA Reading Day at Harrison Elementary School (story begins on page 20).

Back row (l-r) - Matthew Strickroth, Tom Allert, Amy Guldner, Martha Knutson, Kenny Ramirez

Middle (l-r) - Lori Myers, Agustin Tovar, Jacqueline Carey-Wilson, Angela Viramontes, Mike Brusselback, Jeff Van Wagenen, Veronica Garcia

Front (l-r) - Shumika Sookdeo, Cathy Holmes, Daniela Tovar-Jalalian, Brandy Tristao, Paula McIntyre, Theresa Savage, Sharon Ramirez, Kelly Moran, Mary Avalos

The photo is compliments of Jacqueline Carey-Wilson.

THE UNIQUE ROLE OF CASA VOLUNTEERS IN THE JUVENILE DEPENDENCY SYSTEM

by Jessica Muñoz

Amber has been in foster care since she was a toddler and has struggled with severe behavioral challenges as a result of past abuse. Because of her complex needs, Amber has lived in multiple foster homes and group homes.*

Patricia is a community member who volunteers in the juvenile dependency court as a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteer. After completing a comprehensive training program, Patricia was appointed by the juvenile court to advocate for Amber.

Like many teens who have been disappointed by the adults in their lives, Amber was initially reluctant to trust Patricia and often refused to see her or take her calls. However, with time and Patricia's unfailing consistency, their relationship grew. Patricia was patient and encouraging. Gradually, Amber's school performance improved, and she began to set goals. Patricia kept Amber's assigned social worker and attorney updated on her progress. At her most recent court hearing, Amber told Patricia's supervisor that she decided to "change her life" during one of her visits with Patricia. Amber realized that Patricia would never give up on her. Amber said that Patricia's persistence taught her that she was not worthless. Amber's behavior has improved significantly. During the hearing, the judge determined it was now safe to place Amber with her adult sister, something Amber had been wanting to be possible for a long time. Amber is thrilled to be living in a safe, stable placement with family.

Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteers, like Patricia, are "lay volunteers" who are appointed by the juvenile dependency court to "help define the best interests of children"... under the jurisdiction of the juvenile court." (Cal. Rules of Court Section 5.655(a)(1).)

CASA volunteers spend time with the child to whom they are assigned. As they build rapport with the child, CASAs are able to provide information, observations, and recommendations to juvenile court judges through formal written reports and to the child's attorney and social worker informally between court hearings. While there are many dedicated and caring professionals working within the juvenile dependency system, they are often trying to meet the needs of many families at once. Because CASAs are volunteers, they typically serve only one child or one sibling group at a time. This provides the child with the benefit of a caring, consistent adult who is focused on their needs, and wishes for the future exclusively.

CASA volunteers commit to remaining on their cases for at least 18 months, although many CASA volunteers choose to serve longer. CASAs report that they typically volunteer 10-15 hours per month. The time they devote to their cases includes visiting the child, reading documents, speaking to professionals working on the case, and writing court reports.

In Riverside County, Voices for Children (VFC) is the designated CASA program serving the juvenile court. VFC is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. VFC's role is to recruit, screen, and train community members in Riverside County who volunteer to serve as CASAs. VFC provides CASAs with extensive pre-service

and in-service training. Importantly, VFC provides ongoing support and supervision for CASA volunteers throughout the entire duration of their service. Each CASA volunteer is paired with a member of VFC's professional staff who is available to provide guidance and assistance. VFC's staff members have backgrounds in law, child welfare, social work, psychology, education, and other related fields. There is even an emergency number CASAs can call to receive assistance on their cases 24 hours a day, seven days a week. VFC is also the CASA program serving San Diego County.

While CASA volunteers served nearly 500 children in Riverside County last year, there are typically 100 or more children waiting for a CASA volunteer at any given time. There are lots of ways that the legal community can support Voices for Children and make CASA volunteers available for more children.

- **Consider Volunteering:** While it is not required for volunteers to have formal legal training or experience, some legal professionals find that serving as a CASA volunteer can be a rewarding way to give back to the community and to learn more about an area of law with which they may not be very familiar.
- **Spread the Word:** VFC is always looking for potential CASA volunteers. Law firms, professional associations, and service organizations can request an informational presentation for their staff or members, share information about VFC in their newsletters or social media, or include VFC in their directory of volunteer opportunities.
- **Fundraising and Sponsorship Opportunities:** As a nonprofit organization, VFC raises every dollar needed to train and support CASA volunteers for children in the juvenile dependency system. VFC offers unique sponsorship opportunities to law firms and legal organizations through our Amicus Circle.
- **Cy Pres Awards:** VFC appreciates the opportunity to be considered for cy pres awards. VFC qualifies for residual awards in class action cases pursuant to California Code of Civil Procedure section 384(b) and can provide quickly the needed affidavit for the court regarding the program and services offered. CASAs often advocate for children consistent with the objectives of many class action suits, including education, employment, housing and financial stability, and medical and mental health services.

To learn more about Voices for Children's CASA program, explore how the community can help, or be inspired by more stories of how CASA volunteers have made an impact in the lives of children and families navigating the juvenile dependency system, visit VFC's website, www.speakupnow.org.

**Names have been changed to ensure confidentiality*

Jessica Muñoz, Esq., MFS, is the President & CEO of Voices for Children. She may be reached at (951) 357-9100 or jessicam@peakupnow.org.

