



VOICES FOR CHILDREN

THE VOICE

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FALL 2023

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“Kindness can transform
someone’s dark moment
with a blaze of light.
You’ll never know how much
your caring matters.”

—AMY LEIGH MERCREE

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 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.



LETTER FROM OUR PRESIDENT & CEO

Dear Friends,

“I don’t consider CASA Bob a ‘service.’ He is my friend, someone who will watch me graduate someday and even get married!” That’s how a young boy responded when asked what he thinks about his Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteer.

The unique advocacy CASAs provide motivates us and inspires our vision to serve every child in foster care in San Diego and Riverside Counties who needs us. One of the things we enjoy most at Voices for Children is celebrating the impactful ways our CASA volunteers serve young people in our community and the generosity of our donors and community partners who make their advocacy possible. This issue of *The Voice* affords us many opportunities to do just that.

In our Fall edition, we highlight how CASA volunteers advocate for efforts to reunify children safely with their families of origin and support relatives who come forward to be caregivers. A key objective of the child welfare system is to address the challenges families face that impact child safety and well-being. The individualized attention that CASAs provide to children and their families can support reunification, and the observations that CASAs report to the Court enhance the information judges can use to make critical decisions about whether and when children can go home.

There are lots of other accomplishments to celebrate, too.

- In Riverside County, we were proud to achieve a significant milestone — surpassing our goal of providing a CASA to more than 500 children during the 22-23 fiscal year. We could not have accomplished this without incredible support from individuals, organizations, and foundations across the county.
- We celebrate the more than 40 youth who graduated high school with their CASAs in the crowd this year, and we commend two of our stellar Real World Panelists, Anthony O. and Josh B., on graduating college.
- As we approach Veterans Day, we are pleased to feature two of our outstanding CASA volunteers who have served in the U.S. Armed Forces and continue to help their community by speaking up for children in foster care.
- We are honored to welcome four dedicated community leaders to our Board of Directors who will strengthen our efforts to recruit, train, and support volunteers who advocate for children in foster care.
- At our extraordinary Starry Starry Night gala, we raised over \$1.94 million to support our CASA program in San Diego.

We are grateful to our committed community partners and generous philanthropic supporters who are true champions of our special mission. This year at Voices for Children, we will advocate for more than 2,300 children across San Diego and Riverside Counties.

Your steady and caring support enables us to make sure children in foster care know that there is someone in their corner who believes in them. Looking for ways to help? Become a CASA. Participate in #GivingTuesday. Make a special end-of-year gift. As we approach a season of gratitude, thank you for all you have done — and will do — to support vulnerable children and their families this year. We look forward to growing our impact together in the coming year as we work towards providing a CASA advocate to every child who needs one.

With appreciation,

Jessica Muñoz, Esq., MFS
President & CEO



Voices for Children Riverside County CASA Program Serves 521 Local Youth in Foster Care during FY22-23

In 2015, Voices for Children became the Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program for Riverside County. Since then, the program has grown steadily, serving 140 children in 2016 to 486 children in 2021. In the 22-23 fiscal year, Voices for Children supported 521 local children in foster care in Riverside County through their CASA program. **This achievement is particularly significant as it represents the highest number of youth served in a single year since the Riverside County program's inception.**

The Riverside County CASA program started with a small team and a handful of CASA volunteers who built the foundation to serve 1,000 children from 2015 to 2021. The goal has always been to serve more children, as an estimated 5,000 children will spend time in Riverside County foster care this year. These children live from Corona to Palo Verde and everywhere in between, yet the team has worked tirelessly to build meaningful relationships across this expansive county.



Above: VFC Riverside County program staff celebrate milestone accomplishment with VFC President & CEO Jessica Muñoz, Esq., MFS.

The Riverside County program team has broken barriers in recruitment, raising funds, and leveraging the unique characteristics of the distinct communities with which VFC collaborates. Riverside County staff now work across the county region, encompassing 28 cities and several unincorporated communities spanning urban, suburban, and rural settings.

IN THE COMMUNITY

Right: Over 40 staff and CASA volunteers walked in the San Diego Pride Parade in July.

Below right: San Diego Pride awarded Voices for Children 3rd place for outstanding nonprofit contingent!

Below left: Riverside County Program Manager Nicole Boettger with newly sworn-in CASA Louree during a graduation ceremony on August 30.



LEAD STORY

*For a CASA, family reunification is about **empathy** and **understanding***

How CASAs Impact a Child's Foster Care Journey

At the outset of most cases, the goal is to reunify a child with their parents or family of origin, as long as it is safe and possible to do so. To achieve this, the Court provides parents or legal guardian with services or resources they may need to regain custody. There is a lot at stake, and because of that, a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) can support children and families by advocating for reunification when it is safe and actively listening when they share their experiences. CASAs support the parents, help connect them with vital resources, and advocate for reunification when it is in the child's best interests.

One caring and consistent adult by the child's side throughout the reunification process can make all the difference. A CASA perseveres and works toward building trust with the child, letting them know they have someone in their corner who is truly by their side. CASAs get to know the children, parents, and family, as well as others involved in their lives — including foster parents or relative caregivers, therapists, teachers, and attorneys — collaborating with everyone to make family reunification the top priority. A CASA is there to walk in the park, read books at a library, visit the zoo, or go out for ice cream. It's a unique bond built on genuineness and letting a kid be just a kid. It is a relationship that can last a lifetime.

Below: Brothers Angel and Mario.



How CASAs Help Families of Origin

CASA volunteers strive to engage and connect with the families so that they have the support and resources needed to have their children safely come back home. Our CASA model works to identify a family's strengths. By doing so, we're communicating that we value family connections, and in turn, empowering parents to collaborate with us to help achieve a successful reunification. CASAs support families of origin by:

Collaborating with families to help them have the resources they need to support reunification.



Assisting with visitations between the parents and children to ensure there is the opportunity to help repair and build the family bond.



Communicating with all parties involved in the child's case to ensure their best interest are prioritized throughout the reunification process.



Offering guidance to parents as they work to provide a safe and nurturing home for their child.



CASA Jill from San Diego County was paired with 11-year-old "Angel"* after Angel was removed from his home. Angel was placed with his 22-year old brother, "Mario." Over time, Angel's parents opened up and agreed to engage in the reunification services provided by the Court. During this time of uncertainty in Angel's life, CASA Jill took it upon herself to volunteer weekly in Angel's classroom and be a constant presence in Angel's life, making it easier for Angel to warm up to her. At the same time, CASA Jill also supported Mario, who was learning to be a caretaker for his younger brother. She admired Mario for providing Angel unconditional support and love throughout this difficult time.

Despite the parents' hesitation at the start of the case, CASA Jill was happy to see the family work hard to change their circumstances and do what was necessary to ensure Angel had a nurturing home. CASA Jill supported and witnessed the family grow and rebuild a positive

relationship with Angel as they engaged in consistent visitations. With the support and recommendations of CASA Jill during court hearings, the family was able to complete all the necessary steps to provide a safe home and reunify with Angel.

“You don’t know when you’re in training how incredibly impactful you are going to be in this person’s life.” — CASA JILL

Reunification significantly improves permanency outcomes for children and parents. The Child Welfare Information Gateway reports that children do better in school, parents do better at work, and families thrive long-term after reunification. It offers a second chance for parents and children to have a stable and happy family life.

Sometimes, reunification is gradual; other times, a family’s needs can be addressed more swiftly. Nevertheless, seeing a child reunited with their parent(s) in a safe home and realizing that they played a part in preserving a family is one of a CASAs most fulfilling experiences.

CASA Cassie from Riverside County was assigned to siblings who wanted to go home to their parents. CASA Cassie agreed this was in the children’s best interests and was determined to help the family reunify. As the family cycled through five different social workers, CASA Cassie became the most consistent person on the case. The parents often said they would have lost hope without CASA Cassie. She was overjoyed when the case closed in a happy family reunification.

“Keep an open mind, have realistic expectations, and remember all families are in different stages of their case. We need to just meet them where they are and help where we can!” — CASA CASSIE

How CASAs Focus on Family Bonds

Placing children with relatives helps maintain family connections and cultural traditions that can minimize the trauma of family separation and relieve the anxieties of traditional foster placements. CASA volunteers’ focus on family can lead to relative placements and kinship adoptions by identifying and re-engaging with an aunt, uncle, grandparent or other family member who may be well-positioned to provide nurturing care for the child. The CASA, relative caregiver, and biological parents can collaborate to create a robust support system for successful reunification. When the child cannot remain safely with their parents, CASAs can advocate for an adoption with a relative. Through this process, CASAs can build trusting relationships with family members and support them by:

- facilitating frequent visits,
- ensuring they have everything to qualify as a relative caregiver,
- assisting with the transition,
- and helping access programs and services to meet the needs of the children they are raising.

While adoption by a relative is not reunification, the CASA can be essential in advocating for this if it is in the child’s best interest. This way, the CASA ensures that their assigned child can grow up having a sense of belonging with relatives who can affirm their cultural and familial identities. CASAs often form strong relationships with the kinship family and maintain an ongoing relationship long after the adoption to help increase the child’s sense of stability.

“When children remain connected to their culture, community, and extended family and parents have a robust support system, there is a greater likelihood of successful reunification. That’s what we want for the youth we serve — for them to grow up feeling supported and loved by people who care for them.” — JESSICA MUÑOZ, ESQ., MFS, PRESIDENT & CEO AT VOICES FOR CHILDREN

Reunification is not just about bringing families back together; it is a catalyst for healing and growth. When families are reunified successfully, the benefits can extend to multiple generations. Stable family environments promote consistency, which is vital for a child’s healthy development. Reunification equips families with the necessary skills and support to navigate future challenges, reducing the risk of recurring involvement with the child welfare system. Voices for Children recognizes the importance of reunification in helping families heal, grow, and rebuild their lives together. Our CASAs are firmly committed to supporting and advocating for safe reunification, working toward a future where all children can flourish within the embrace of a safe and loving family.

**Names and details have been changed to protect privacy.*



Above: A young girl plays lotería with relative caregiver.



Closing the Achievement Gap

Empowering Stories: Real Word Panelists Graduate from College

According to the National Foster Youth Institute, just 3-4% of former youth in foster care obtain a four-year college degree. Graduating from college is a life-transforming achievement for any young individual, but for those who experience foster care, it is a testament to their perseverance.

Anthony O. spent a third of his life in foster care and now advocates for other youth living in foster care. He was supported by his CASA, Daniel, for over a year. Anthony found a safe, permanent home with his great-grandmother through CASA Daniel's advocacy. He recently graduated from the University of California, Los Angeles, and is currently working with the LA Galaxy soccer club, continuing to pursue his dream career in sports communication.

Josh B. has had the unwavering support of his CASA, Tim, who has been in his life since 2016. As Josh navigated his way through the foster care system as a teenager and young adult, CASA Tim was by his side, providing crucial advocacy and caring support. Their relationship, built on trust and consistency, helped prepare Josh for the stability he now has as a graduate with a degree in business administration from Goodwin University.

Anthony and Josh are Real Word Panelists who speak locally and nationally about life in the child welfare system and the impact of their CASAs on their lives.

In their own words, they shared what it meant for them to graduate college and reach this extraordinary milestone.

What did it feel like to be handed a college diploma?

"Being handed my diploma was the most surreal moment in my life. I couldn't help but feel proud of all that I have overcome and accomplished throughout my educational journey." —ANTHONY

"I felt excited, like I achieved something and finally amounted to something in my life." —JOSH

What is one thing you are proud of accomplishing during your college experience?

"I was able to kick off my career and place myself in a position better than others coming out of college at my age." —JOSH

"I made it a point to build a network and support system of peers and humans I knew could support me while trusting me to do the same for them." —ANTHONY

What kind of support did you receive from your CASA that led you to this achievement?

"CASA Daniel helped me truly gain confidence in myself to believe that an accomplishment like a college diploma was attainable if I was passionate about it." —ANTHONY

"CASA Tim helped me understand what it meant to look at the bigger picture." —JOSH

In what ways have you changed throughout your college experience?

"I have changed throughout college, becoming more mature and holding myself accountable." —JOSH

"I've become extremely independent and emotionally aware of my feelings." —ANTHONY

What is a memory that brings you joy from your time at college?

"A memory that really brings me joy is setting up my Christmas tree and decorations in my own apartment." —ANTHONY

"One memory I got to have from college was creating genuine friends." —JOSH

You had a male CASA. What does having a consistent male presence in your life mean to you?

"It meant the world to me. I had never been comfortable around men due to my biological father, and it's nice that I got to heal that part of me because of this relationship." —JOSH

"Having a male role model like my CASA Daniel was so important for me, as I never truly had a man to look up to who succeeded in a career, supported his family, and was open with his emotions and shared them." —ANTHONY



Above: Josh B. with CASA Tim



Left: Anthony O.

CASA VOLUNTEERS CONNECT MILITARY SERVICE TO VOICES FOR CHILDREN'S MISSION

For Veterans Day, Voices for Children is honoring its Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteers who have served in the armed forces, including CASA volunteers José from San Diego County and Ariella from Riverside County.

From serving in the military at a young age to applying their life skills and dedicating their time to support children in foster care, they are passionate CASAs who have made a profound impact since joining Voices for Children.

José became a CASA in 2018 after hearing about Voices for Children on *KPBS Radio*. With unwavering commitment, José has served as a guiding light for five case children within the child welfare system, embodying the essence of mentorship and positive influence. He takes the discipline instilled in him during his 20 years of service in the U.S. Marine Corps and demonstrates to his assigned youth that he is there to help, meet their needs, and treat them with respect. One of José's most impactful moments was visiting his case child after the child had reunified with his family successfully.

"Seeing the entire sibling group back together was incredibly rewarding. The child appreciates everything I do for him, and the mother appreciates that I have been a positive male role model. I feel honored to have helped guide a child's future." —CASA JOSÉ

Throughout his journey as a CASA, José has exhibited remarkable dedication to the well-being and growth of the children under his care. He was trained to be prepared for anything and overcome every obstacle in front of him with a fighting spirit, and this certainly makes him a fierce advocate and a consistent presence for a child who is navigating change and uncertainty.

Beyond fulfilling his role as an advocate, José is a remarkable role model for youth. His ability to connect with and inspire these young individuals is commendable. His compassionate and patient approach has helped children facing challenging circumstances see opportunities that might have otherwise gone unnoticed. By fostering a sense of belonging, he has restored hope and built a brighter future for those he serves.

Ariella is a United States Air Force First Sergeant whose primary function is ensuring a mission-ready force. Ariella first heard about Voices for Children through a friend who recommended that she become a CASA. It did not take long for her to feel that same calling to service; in this case, to help the vulnerable children in the foster care system. She has been a CASA with Voices for Children since March 2020.

As she rose through military ranks, she realized the importance of advocating for her troops and their families, and now she uses her skill set to advocate for children in foster care.



Left: CASA Ariella;
Right: CASA José, 1998.

During her time as a CASA, Ariella has served two youths, both teenage girls, and has been a beacon of support, empathy, and dedication. In both cases, Ariella has gained their trust by taking the time to get to know them. She makes every effort and uses every resource available to advocate for their best interests. From compiling a detailed report to the Court that contributes to a successful reunification to advocating for consistent monthly visits to reinvigorate a sibling bond to holding educational rights for her assigned youth and serving as the point person for the youth's academic needs, Ariella does it all.

"The experience of being a CASA is special. Despite the highs and lows, my case child means the world to me, and I'm grateful to be a friend and mentor to her. Serving as a CASA aligns perfectly with my military ideology." —CASA ARIELLA

Voices for Children is grateful to José, Ariella, and all our CASAs, staff, and board members who have served our country and now help provide life-changing advocacy to vulnerable children in foster care. We invite all military members to use their skills to advocate for youth in foster care by becoming CASA. With your heart of service, sense of duty, and loyalty, you can make a lasting impact on the life of a child. If someone you know is a military member interested in a new kind of service, take a few minutes and recommend them as a CASA volunteer at speakupnow.org/recommend.

Spotlights



SAN DIEGO COUNTY SPOTLIGHT

Sabrina Goosby Marks 35 Years at Voices for Children

Congratulations to Voices for Children's Vice President of Programs Sabrina Goosby for an astounding 35 years of extraordinary service! Sabrina's contributions have been instrumental in shaping the organization and setting the stage for its continued success. When she joined Voices for Children in 1988, it was a small operation with a handful of volunteers and staff. Sabrina started in a clerical role, but gradually took on increasing levels of responsibility, becoming an expert in volunteer support and supervision, recruitment, and training as well as organizing children's activities and events.

Throughout the years, Sabrina has been a strong, passionate, and committed advocate. Her empathy and care have created a safe haven for children, volunteers, and staff. One of her most outstanding achievements has been the establishment of The Real Word speakers panel, comprised of courageous individuals who speak locally and nationally about their experiences living in the foster care system and how their CASAs have helped them.

Sabrina exemplifies the true spirit of service and dedication, leaving an indelible mark on our organization and the community.

Thank you, Sabrina, for your unwavering commitment to improving the lives of children in foster care!



RIVERSIDE COUNTY SPOTLIGHT

San Manuel Golf Tournament Raises \$85,000 for Voices for Children

The San Manuel Band of Mission Indians, located near Highland, California, has supported Voices for Children's Riverside County program since 2018. Supporting nonprofit organizations is part of the Tribe's commitment to their call of Yawa' — to act on one's beliefs by giving back through the San Manuel Cares program. Each year, the San Manuel Golf Tournament recognizes nonprofit organizations that show exemplary efforts in the communities they serve. This year, Voices for Children was given the distinct honor of being selected as one of five charities to benefit from the 2023 golf tournament. The 24th annual golf tournament hosted nearly 1,000 participants over five days, marking the largest turnout and the most funds ever raised in the history of the event.

The extraordinary \$85,000 gift will **provide life-transforming CASA advocacy to 42 children living in foster care in Riverside County.**

VFC's President & CEO, Jessica Muñoz, Esq., MFS, said, "San Manuel was one of the earliest supporters of our Riverside County CASA program. As our program has grown, so has their investment in our work. We are deeply grateful for this incredible gift, and we look forward to many more years of continued partnership."

As a small gesture of our appreciation to the Tribe and Yaamava' Resort & Casino, VFC staff members happily volunteered during the tournament, assisting with various tasks each day of the event. We are beyond grateful to the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians for their support of our mission and for their efforts in creating a better tomorrow.



Left to right: Vice Chairman, Johnny Hernandez; Chairwoman Lynn Valbuena; First Governing Council Member, Ed Duro; VFC President & CEO, Jessica Muñoz, Esq., MFS

Voices for Children Welcomes Four New Members to its Board

Four community leaders were recently elected to the Board of Directors for FY23-24. Voices for Children’s board is comprised of community and business leaders responsible for financial oversight, goal setting, and policy development.

We are honored to welcome these dedicated individuals to our board and are grateful for their commitment to the needs and well-being of local children living in foster care.

Amy Eybsen, CPA, Managing Director, GHJ’s Audit and Assurance Practice

Edward Patrick “Pat” Swan, Jr., Esq., Attorney, Jones Day

Jennifer Kropko, Air Force Veteran and Former Tech Executive

Sarah Houghton, Senior Marketing Manager, Sony Electronics

Our Board of Directors currently consists of twenty-six active members. These board members meet regularly and dedicate additional time to participate in fundraising, community outreach events, volunteer recruitment, and CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate) graduation ceremonies. Our current Board Chair, Annette Bradbury, will continue her term this year, supported by her executive team, including Kristi E. Pfister, Esq., AnneElise Goetz, Esq., George Lai, and Andy Christopher.



Amy Eybsen, CPA



Edward Patrick
“Pat” Swan, Jr., Esq.



Jennifer Kropko



Sarah Houghton

FUN WITHOUT FACES: Snapshots of our CASA kids making memories

Left to Right: Brothers and their CASA hike the Pumpkin Rock Trail right in time for Halloween / A CASA takes his case child to his first major league baseball game to see the San Diego Padres, thanks to One Simple Wish / Youth participate in drumming activity during the Summer Sendoff party in honor of CASA Barbara Winicki.



BOARD OF DIRECTORS FY2023-2024

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President & CEO

COMMUNITY ADVISORY COUNCIL Riverside County — FY2023-2024

Liz Jones

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Hector Zatarain

Grants & Giving

The JEM Project Shines Bright!

Voices for Children is incredibly grateful for the support we have received from The JEM Project over the past four years! The JEM Project is a grantmaking foundation that was established in 2019 to provide financial support to nonprofit organizations throughout the United States. Their mission is to protect and support what is underserved, including children, animals, women, and the environment.

Voices for Children is grateful for The JEM Project's dedication to supporting and empowering children in foster care! The JEM Project made their first grant to Voices for Children in 2020, helping Voices for Children to maintain stability during the uncertainty of the COVID pandemic. Since then, The JEM Project has provided Voices for Children with consistent support, allowing us to provide life-changing advocacy to 30 children in foster care in San Diego County. We are proud to be a grant recipient of The JEM Project!



**GIVING
TUESDAY**

Now more than ever we are
called to make a difference.

SAVE THE DATE

November 28, 2023

Clockwise from top: The Rady Shell at Jacobs Park / Voices for Children Board of Directors Chair, Annette Bradbury / Joshua Kim, Starry Starry Night Paddle Raise / Mialissa F. featured in the evening's impact video with Voices for Children Director of Advocacy, Megan Marashlian / Starry Starry Night Event Chairs, Marina Marrelli, Patricia Brutton, and guest / Voices for Children President & CEO, Jessica Muñoz, Esq., MFS, 2023 CASA of the Year, Bonnie Grossman, Voices for Children Advocacy Supervisor, Tanya Ehler.

See the full photo gallery



Watch CASA of the Year Video



Watch Everyone Deserves a Catie Video



Starry Starry Night

On Thursday, September 28, Voices for Children hosted close to 500 guests for a spectacular evening at The Rady Shell at Jacobs Park. The 2023 gala included performances from the talented Mainly Mozart Youth Orchestra, San Diego Children's Choir, and the San Diego Civic Youth Ballet. We also recognized and celebrated our CASA of the Year, enjoyed a competitive and fun Live Auction, listened to the impactful story of a youth who was formerly in foster care, and received generous commitments from supporters to invest in our CASA program. In total, sponsors and guests contributed over \$1.94 million to continue providing critical advocacy to children in our community who have experienced abuse and neglect.

SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR GENEROUS SPONSORS,

including *VISIONARY SPONSORS* Anonymous Donor and Brutton Family Foundation; *PRESENTING SPONSORS* Annette & Dan Bradbury, Joan & Irwin Jacobs, Darlene Marcos Shiley, Maravai LifeSciences Foundation, and Molly's Angels Foundation; *IMPACT SPONSORS* Capstone Advisors, Farrell Family Foundation, George Lai, MG Properties, Qualcomm, and Katie & Dan Sullivan; *ADVOCATE SPONSORS* Hughes Marino, KPBS, and San Diego Padres; *HOPE SPONSORS* Alphacore Wealth Advisory, Finch, Thornton, Baird LLP, Genentech, Ranch & Coast Magazine, Grossmont Healthcare District, and Monique Rodriguez & Gregory Richardson; *STARRY SPONSORS* California Bank & Trust, Higgs, Fletcher and Mack, Moss Adams LLP, Paradeigm Films, Procopio, The Rose Foundation, U.S. Bank, and Julie Tafel Klaus; *INSPIRATIONAL SPONSORS* Gensler, San Diego Foundation, David Brown, Martha & Mark Sottosanti, Noam and Sara Glick Foundation, Rumis Family Trust, and Blue Shield California; *IN-KIND SPONSORS* Crossover Print Management, Giving Back Magazine, Halcyon Seas, Pacific Apparel, Push Play, and Steak 48.



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Sign up today!
Visit
speakupnow.org/volunteer
.....

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, December 2
Wednesday, December 13
Saturday, January 6
Tuesday, January 16

Riverside County

Thursday, December 7
Monday, December 11
Wednesday, December 13
Tuesday, December 19

All information sessions will be in an online, virtual format unless otherwise noted on our website.

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