



VOICES FOR CHILDREN

THE VOICE

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SPRING 2024

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“Every time a child is saved from the dark side of life, every time one of us makes the effort to make a difference in a child’s life, we add light and healing to our own lives.”

—OPRAH WINFREY

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,

We have some exciting things to share with you in this issue of *The Voice*.

May is National Foster Care Awareness month, which presents an opportunity each year to amplify the needs of the youth we serve and invite our community to become involved in our efforts to advocate for them. Our second annual *Your Voice, Their Future* campaign, culminating on May 1, is one of the ways we do just that. In this issue, you’ll learn more about our goal to provide Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) to 150 children who are waiting for a CASA and how you can recommend someone you know to learn more about becoming a CASA.

May is also Mental Health Awareness month. Children who have experienced abuse and neglect often experience mental health challenges at some point during their time in foster care. In our main article on page 4, you will learn more about how CASA volunteers work alongside child welfare professionals to identify and address the mental health needs of the youth we serve and the tremendous positive impact that a caring, consistent adult can have on all aspects of a child’s well-being.

In San Diego County, we were honored to once again host our Judges’ Luncheon this past February. We are deeply grateful to all of the judges who attended and shared their thoughts and observations as panelists at the event. We are also looking forward to our signature springtime events, **Uplifting Voices**, and the **Fostering Hope Golf Classic**. We hope you’ll join us.

In Riverside County, we celebrated the opening of our new office location in Temecula in March. Nearly 40% of the Riverside County children we serve live in the southwest region of the county. Hosted in collaboration with the Temecula Valley Chamber of Commerce, the event was a special opportunity to acknowledge the incredible advocacy our CASAs make possible.

It is never lost on us just how many people make our work at Voices for Children possible. Our CASAs, Board, donors, community supporters, staff — and you — are all vital to our commitment to children in San Diego and Riverside Counties. We simply can’t say thank you enough.

With appreciation,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jessica Muñoz".



Your Voice, Their Future: Volunteer Recruitment Campaign

As a supporter of Voices for Children, you know firsthand how important it is for children in foster care to have someone in their corner. You can make a life-changing impact on a child today by participating in Voices for Children's *Your Voice, Their Future* volunteer recruitment campaign. The campaign, now in its second year, is taking place now through May (National Foster Care Awareness Month) and aims to recruit new Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) to serve 150 local youth in foster care currently on our waiting list who are in immediate need of an advocate. We are currently halfway to our goal, but we need your help to serve these children!

We invite you to recommend a caring friend, family member, or co-worker who you think would make a great CASA. Multiple recommendations are welcome, and it only takes a few minutes to recommend someone.

Visit [speakupnow.org/recommend](http://www.speakupnow.org/recommend) to submit recommendations and find other simple ways to help support children in foster care.



YOUR VOICE, THEIR FUTURE



Help us move 150 children in foster care off our waitlist by May 1! Recommend a voice you know to become a CASA volunteer!

www.speakupnow.org/recommend



IN THE COMMUNITY



Left to right: Jessica Muñoz, Esq., MFS, VFC President & CEO; Real Word (RW) speaker Anthony; Sabrina Goosby, VFC Vice President of Programs; RW speakers Emanuel, Joseph, Vanessa; Kristina Lisica, VFC Program Manager; and Stephen Moore, VFC Chief Program Officer.



Left to right: Murfey Company Director of Construction Curtis Brooks, VFC CASA Recruitment Associate Yana Aldridge, Murfey Company Co-CEO Scott Murfey, CASA Tim Riley, and Murfey Company Co-CEO Russ Murfey at the first-ever Murfey Company Charity Golf Tournament that raised over \$7,000 in support of VFC.



Left: VFC Riverside County Philanthropy Manager Brianna Miller joined leaders from 130 other businesses and nonprofits at Lake Elsinore's Diamond Stadium.



Above: VFC street banners are now throughout San Diego, including Chula Vista, La Jolla, Mission Valley, and Rancho Peñasquitos.

Meeting the Moment: *CASAs support children's mental health throughout their foster care journeys*

According to the National Foster Youth Institute, on average, **4 out of every 5 children** who enter foster care do so with severe mental health needs.



Each child we serve has suffered Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs): traumatic events that occur in childhood that can include neglect, abuse, or growing up in a family with mental health or substance use issues. The presence of ACEs can have long-term consequences in a youth's life through adulthood, being linked to chronic health problems, high-risk behaviors, mental illness, and more. However, our Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) model is designed to support youth or children who have experienced such trauma. The presence of a supportive adult relationship can serve as an influential factor against the adverse effects of childhood trauma.

How CASA volunteers build resilience in trauma-impacted youth

CASAs pay attention. They stand by children throughout their time in foster care, showing them they can rely on adults. CASAs learn about children's unique mental health needs by spending time with them and speaking with members of the children's support network. They monitor their access to mental health services and progress on therapeutic goals. When children encounter barriers to receiving critical mental health services, CASAs collaborate with the children's social worker, attorney, and judge to find solutions.

The American Academy of Pediatrics Healthy Foster Care America Initiative identifies mental and behavioral health as the "greatest unmet health need for children and teens in foster care." Through their advocacy, CASAs help break down barriers to help youth in foster care get the mental health support that they need.

Being there through all the ups and downs

Since 2021, CASA Christina has been a consistent advocate for Jonathan*, an adolescent boy who struggles with mental health challenges and developmental delays. She has been a constant in his life through multiple changes in placements, schools, and services. Through her advocacy, Jonathan is now in a placement that allows him to receive therapeutic services. CASA Christina also serves as his educational rights holder. As Jonathan approaches high school graduation, she helps make the best decisions regarding his academic success.

When asked how she supports Jonathan's mental health as his CASA, she shared, **"I have established receptive communication with the therapist, the school, and daily mental health staff. The cooperative sharing of information regarding behavior, medication, and mood observations has helped determine a more fluid treatment plan for him."**

When Jonathan is having a tough time, CASA Christina picks up his favorite meal or takes him for a car ride to sing songs playing on the radio, providing a welcome distraction. These small gestures and the consistency of CASA Christina's presence allow Jonathan to experience a trusting relationship and relieve his stress of "not knowing what to expect" from an adult. With this established stability, Jonathan can feel hope and explore possibilities about his future beyond simply surviving.



Listening, learning, and supporting

For over a year and a half, CASA Tracey has diligently served as an advocate for her assigned youth, 18-year-old Mariana. She is a vibrant teen with a great sense of humor, enjoys interacting with others, and has a positive outlook on life despite the adversity she has endured. However, before she had the consistency and stability of a CASA in her life, Mariana struggled to regulate her emotions and develop coping mechanisms to make healthy choices. Needing mental health support, Mariana has been receiving treatment outside of San Diego County. Nonetheless, CASA Tracey frequently visits, schedules video chats, and has consistent calls with her, building a very close relationship. Working with Mariana's case manager, social worker, and teachers, CASA Tracey did everything possible for Mariana to complete all the requisites to

finish high school successfully. After many study sessions, Mariana received her high school diploma in 2023, feeling proud of herself for everything she had accomplished. With her CASA's presence and support, Mariana is prospering through her recovery, working part-time, and attending a local college.

“Trust and stability are so important. Consistency of a routine and listening makes the youth feel heard, seen, happy, accepted, and cared for. All these things are often missing from their childhood. Having the support of a CASA is crucial in helping children in foster care have hope that a future is possible for them, and their opportunities are endless.”

— CASA Tracey



Exploring every possible resource

In 2021, CASA Ashley met 14-year-old Sophia*, a young teen with multiple developmental diagnoses and mental health illnesses who had been abandoned numerous times. Her intricate medical history made it challenging to identify a suitable placement. CASA Ashley worked tirelessly to find a supportive placement for Sophia. After three years of exhaustive search efforts, Sophia is now in a small-scale, short-term residential therapeutic program. She is receiving specialized round-the-clock care and therapeutic behavioral services. Sophia is also supported by a dedicated team of mental health specialists, offering a ray of hope in her challenging mental health journey.

When she first met Sophia, CASA Ashley felt she needed to plan engaging activities for their outings. Over time, she realized Sophia enjoyed activities like walking or hiking. **“My youth was enduring so much mental and emotional stress in her day-to-day that quieter and simple visits were providing her the emotional break that she needed,”** shared CASA Ashley. CASA Ashley's consistent advocacy for Sophia has enabled her to trust an adult for the first time in a long time, setting a new course for building and caring for future relationships with others. Sophia's path to recovery is still unfolding slowly, but CASA Ashley's commitment remains steadfast in navigating her journey, finding practical solutions, and providing a promising environment for her.

How Voices for Children trains CASAs to advocate for children's mental health

Our training through Advocate University introduces all CASA volunteers to different types of trauma youth may have endured, focusing on ways that youth respond to trauma, behaviors of concern, and how trauma can have a significant effect on their

mental health. Due to CASAs' unique one-on-one advocacy, they may be the first or only person to observe a warning sign that indicates the child is struggling with their mental health.

“One of the first things that we try to teach is that trauma isn't 'cured' by removing a youth from an abusive or neglectful environment.”

— Jenna Price, VFC Director of Training

VFC offers a multi-disciplinary training curriculum incorporating childhood mental health research and trauma-informed child advocacy, including:

- Guidance on how to work with various mental health professionals
- Understanding and supporting children affected by trauma, particularly concerning the risk factors for emotional distress in teens, transitional age youth, and LGBTQ+ youth
- Strategies for developing cultural competency skills, identifying bias, and creating a sense of belonging

All of children's experiences, neglected or not, will impact their mental health in one way or another. A CASA is equipped with the empathy, patience, and skills to bring issues to light and offer trusted, consistent support to their youth. CASAs cultivate dependability, confidence, and self-awareness. Every child in foster care deserves a chance at a happy and healthy future, and our CASAs do just that as they help improve the lives of the children they advocate for.

The role of a CASA isn't just meaningful; it's *transformative*.

**Names and identifying details have been changed to protect confidentiality.*

Highlights

CASA Volunteer's Tireless Commitment Leads To Adoption



Above: Caleb (front) and CASA Kelly G. (right) with Caleb's adoptive mother and adopted siblings at the adoption hearing presided over by Judge Rohanee Zapanta.

**Names and identifying details have been changed to protect confidentiality*

***Courtesy Photo*

In 2016, CASA Kelly was assigned to his second case, Caleb*, a one-year-old infant who is developmentally delayed and was abandoned by his mother. CASA Kelly answered the call to be Caleb's advocate, and the two formed a special connection in the following years, including memorable moments and milestone achievements such as Caleb's first words, first steps, first days at school, summer camps, and more.

CASA Kelly worked closely with Caleb's social worker, caregiver, and medical specialists. Together, they helped monitor his complex health conditions and ongoing medical needs. They also collaborated and advocated for Caleb's education, getting him the best schooling and support, including full-time aides, adapted physical education, and music therapy.

“The physical challenges Caleb faces take a back seat to his persevering spirit, which is heartwarming and inspirational to all who meet him.” — CASA Kelly

Caleb's caregiver made it known she wished to adopt him and provide him with his forever home. The caregiver and CASA Kelly navigated the adoption process together. Through countless hours of advocacy and a deep commitment to his well-being, CASA Kelly supported Caleb's caregiver and helped pave the way for a successful adoption. The adoption was finalized in October 2023, and Caleb is now in a permanent loving home. CASA Kelly says it brings him great joy to know how far Caleb has come and with the love and support that he has today, he's looking forward to seeing how much more Caleb can thrive and reach his fullest potential.

Meet Dr. Cynthia, a CASA Volunteer Who Does It All

Dr. Cynthia began her journey as a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) while completing her doctorate in educational leadership in San Diego. She learned about Voices for Children (VFC) from a colleague, attended an information session, and was assigned to her first case in 2008.

For 11 years, she served as a CASA for three brothers who were placed apart and had different permanency plans. As their CASA, she happily chaperoned a 'prom night,' attended high school graduations, and more. Being there for the boys' birthdays and other milestones over the years was rewarding to Cynthia, especially knowing they did not have anyone else there to celebrate them. Throughout her time on their case, the boys had multiple attorneys, several social workers, and countless placements. She learned firsthand the importance of being the one consistent person in the life of a youth in foster care. When reflecting on her case, Cynthia said, **“The boys learned to trust that I would show up when expected and would advocate for their best interests.”** This consistency allowed her to build a strong relationship with the boys that continues to this day.

When the case closed in 2019, Cynthia stayed involved with VFC as a member of the CASA Outreach Team, a group of CASAs who represent VFC throughout San Diego County. She has given presentations, shared her experience with potential CASAs during information sessions, posted fliers, and worked booths at community events. When Cynthia retired and relocated to Menifee, her support

for VFC did not stop there. She then got involved with VFC's Riverside County program and worked with Riverside County's CASA Recruitment and Outreach Manager, Kathi Shaner, to create a CASA Outreach Team for Riverside County, which now consists of 30 members.

Cynthia also decided she was ready for a new case. This time, she was assigned to a case in Riverside County. With her experience and adaptiveness, she is now the CASA to siblings through our Pechanga Tribal Court CASA program. As only the third CASA to be assigned through this program, Cynthia enjoys getting to know the family and recently completed her first court report.

In addition to the thousands of hours Cynthia has volunteered to VFC, she has made generous financial contributions to the San Diego and Riverside County programs. Although all CASAs are extraordinary, Cynthia is a clear example of someone who has gone above and beyond her commitment as a CASA.



Above: CASA Cynthia A.

**Names and identifying details have been changed to protect confidentiality*

RIVERSIDE COUNTY SPOTLIGHT

Temecula Valley Chamber of Commerce Hosts Ribbon-Cutting Ceremony for New VFC Office

Voices for Children's (VFC) Riverside County program moved into a new office in the City of Temecula. The location, near Old Town Temecula, is in addition to the program's offices in Palm Desert and the City of Riverside. On March 20, the new space was celebrated with a grand opening and ribbon-cutting ceremony hosted by the Temecula Valley Chamber of Commerce. The celebration was attended by VFC staff, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) volunteers, Community Advisory Council members, Juvenile Court judges, the City Council of Temecula, community partners including the Pechanga Band of Indians, New York Life Insurance, Riverside County Department of Public Social Services, U.S. Bank and other supporters.

VFC was honored to receive certificates from several city leaders, including Riverside County Supervisor Chuck Washington, President & CEO of the Temecula Valley Chamber of Commerce Brooke Nunn, and representatives from the Office of Assembly Member Kate Sanchez and the Office of State Senator Kelly Seyarto.

Although VFC has had a presence in southwestern Riverside County since the program's inception in 2015, VFC is thrilled to have its own warm and welcoming home with multiple offices for VFC staff members, a conference room for CASA and staff meetings, an interview room for potential CASAs, and a kitchen area. VFC would like to express our sincere gratitude to David Marino, Executive Vice President at Hughes Marino, for helping us locate a beautiful office space.



Above: VFC staff, community partners, and supporters gather for the official ribbon-cutting ceremony held on March 20.

SAN DIEGO COUNTY SPOTLIGHT

Lessons from the Bench: Voices for Children's Annual Judges' Luncheon

This year's Voices for Children's Annual Judges' Luncheon, held on February 6, honored our esteemed judges, passionate volunteers, selfless donors, and dedicated community partners whose unwavering support of our CASA program continues to light the way toward brighter futures for children in foster care. More than 150 supporters, including many of our CASAs, attended the program.

Dr. Matt Morscheck, a dedicated CASA volunteer, gave a personal testimonial of the difference one individual can make in the life of a child in foster care and the profound emotional support CASAs provide.

“Being a CASA has not only helped me connect to my community, it has opened my heart, provided meaning and a sense of purpose, and provided valuable perspective on my own opportunities and struggles — I have often been surprised at the number of ways it has enriched my life.”

—Dr. Morscheck

A highlight of the event was the insightful panel of judges who shared their unique perspectives on how the court serves our San Diego youth in foster care and their families daily. We were honored to welcome Presiding Judge España, Judge Keilani, Judge Cumba, and Judge Pulos to the stage for an enlightening discussion highlighting the essential role that Voices for Children's CASAs play in bolstering their efforts to provide hope and stability to children in foster care. The Judges' Luncheon was a powerful reminder of the steadfast advocacy and commitment of the court and our CASA volunteers for children living in foster care.



Above: CASA Matt Morscheck, CASA Tim Riley, CASA Gwen Schwimmer, and CASA José Contreras at this year's Annual Judges' Luncheon.

Scan the QR code to watch Dr. Matt Morscheck's CASA Perspective





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Steak 48 and Del Mar Highlands Town Center Raise More Than \$100,000 for Voices for Children

Steak 48 hosted a private pre-opening dining experience at Del Mar Highlands Town Center to benefit Voices for Children (VFC). The pre-dining experience at Steak 48 raised over \$29,000, and Del Mar Highlands Town Center donated an additional \$75,000 on top of the evening's charity patronage. Together, they raised \$104,000 for VFC and its Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program.

Steak 48 hosted the evening as part of a grand opening rollout generously providing all food and beverage completely complimentary. All attendees enjoyed the extraordinary experience that is Steak 48, and donated the value of their dinner to Voices for Children. All proceeds went directly to our CASA program to provide critical advocacy to more than 40 children in San Diego County foster care.

"Del Mar Highlands Town Center's collaboration with Steak 48 to raise over \$104,000 for Voices for Children's CASA program not only contributes to their cause financially but also amplifies the voices of vulnerable children in foster care. Together, our goal is to help make a difference in the lives of these children, ensuring they are heard and cared for and that their futures are brighter, and to reinforce our dedication to the communities where we live and operate," said Mary Rottler, Chief Operating Officer for First Washington Realty, owners of Del Mar Highlands Town Center in Carmel Valley.

Above (from left to right): VFC Chief Financial Officer James Scoffin; VFC Chief Philanthropy Officer Rebecca Rader; Steak 48 Co-founder and CEO Jeffrey Mastro; Managing Director of Investments at First Washington Realty Sarah Ellis; Senior Vice President of Operations at First Washington Realty Henry A. Avila; VFC Special Events Manager Samantha Daum; and VFC Chief Program Officer Stephen Moore.

FUN WITHOUT FACES: Snapshots of our CASA kids making memories

Left to Right: CASA and case youth visit Balboa Park on a recent outing; a young boy visits the Birch Aquarium with their CASA. Voices for Children is grateful to the Birch Aquarium for donating 150 passes this spring; CASA and teen youth make sushi together.



Las Patronas: More Than Three Decades of Supporting VFC

Few organizations have supported Voices for Children (VFC) for as long as Las Patronas, a philanthropic organization that has been helping San Diego charities since 1946. Since its inception, Las Patronas has donated nearly \$27 million to more than 1,000 organizations. VFC has been benefiting from the generosity of Las Patronas since 1992.

We were delighted to have been selected as one of two fall Legacy Society Beneficiaries. This recent grant allowed us to purchase a mission-critical videoconferencing set-up. This videoconferencing technology will enable our staff to have emergency meetings about the children we serve and enhance our Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) information sessions, training classes, and more.

Las Patronas has awarded VFC with 11 capital grants since 1992. The previous grant, in 2020, helped establish a resource studio for transitional age youth at the main Juvenile Courthouse. We greatly appreciate the decades of support Las Patronas has provided; it has tremendously impacted our ability to help San Diego County children in foster care.



Above: Program Operations staff uses a newly installed video bar for effortless and effective virtual meetings.

LAS PATRONAS

PARTNERING WITH THE SAN DIEGO COMMUNITY SINCE 1946

Join the Starfish Giving Circle

As a part of our monthly giving program, you will directly impact the lives of children in foster care.

speakupnow.org/thestarfishgivingcircle



Events



Saturday, May 18, 2024, Del Mar

Save the date to join us on **Saturday, May 18, 2024**, at the Del Mar Plaza for the third annual Uplifting Voices. Combining inspiring stories from our Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program, philanthropy, light bites, sips, and fun, this event is sure to lift up the voices of our community's most vulnerable children in foster care. The program will feature country music artist and *New York Times* bestselling author Jimmy Wayne. His book, "Walk to Beautiful," is a powerfully emotive account of Jimmy's difficult childhood in foster care and how the love and consistency of a few individuals changed his life. Jimmy later went on to walk halfway across America to raise awareness for youth aging out of the foster care system and lobbied to pass legislative bills extending the age of foster care from 18 to 21 in California and Tennessee.



General admission and sponsorship tickets are now on sale. All net proceeds from Uplifting Voices 2024 will support Voices for Children's CASA program in San Diego County.

For more information on the event, visit speakupnow.org/uplifting-voices



Fostering Hope Golf Classic

Monday, June 3, 2024 A private club in La Jolla

Do you love to play golf while giving back to the community? Co-Chairs Dale Yahnke, Bill Sailer, Jenny Kropko, and Mike Kropko invite you to join us for the 31st Annual Fostering Hope Golf Classic on **Monday, June 3, 2024**. Hosted at a private country club in La Jolla, golfers will enjoy an 18-hole tournament, a cocktail reception, an awards ceremony, and an opportunity to learn more about our Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program.

In 1993, CASA volunteer and Voices for Children Board Member Jack Harrison organized the first Fostering Hope Golf Classic to support Voices for Children's CASA program. Over the past 30 years, the tournament has made it possible for hundreds of children in San Diego County to receive one-on-one advocacy.

However, there are many more children still in need of our help. In honor of Jack's legacy, we encourage you to join us for one of the most successful charity golf events in San Diego and make an impact on the lives of local children in the child welfare system.

For more information about individual tickets and sponsorship opportunities, please visit speakupnow.org/golf

Saturday, Oct. 19, 2024
The Rady Shell at
Jacobs Park

You are invited to Voices for Children's signature event of the year in support of children living in foster care and the life-changing advocacy of our CASA volunteers. Please join us on **Saturday, October 19, 2024**. Starry Starry Night will include a cocktail reception, a compelling program with moving impact stories from our CASA program, an exquisite dining experience, an irresistible live auction, our Fund-a-CASA paddle raise, live performances, and dancing under the stars.

To secure your sponsorship or Honorary Committee membership, contact us at events@speakupnow.org

Registration will open on
July 1, 2024.

For more information, please visit us at voicesforchildrenSSN.org.

All net proceeds from Starry Starry Night 2024 will support Voices for Children's CASA program in San Diego County.

STARRY STARRY NIGHT

OCTOBER 19, 2024



San Diego County
2851 Meadow Lark Drive
San Diego, CA 92123
Phone: 858-569-2019

Riverside County
P.O. Box 7219
Riverside, CA 92513
Phone: 951-472-9301



.....
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, May 4
Tuesday, May 14
Thursday, May 23
Saturday, June 1

Riverside County

Wednesday, May 1
Monday, May 6
Saturday, May 11
Thursday, May 16

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