

CASA Primer for Judicial Officers

TOP QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR
CASA PROGRAM

DECEMBER 2008



ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE
OF THE COURTS

CENTER FOR FAMILIES, CHILDREN
& THE COURTS



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Why ask these questions?

The California Blue Ribbon Commission on Children in Foster Care has recommended that CASA volunteers be made available to all children in foster care. Only about 5 percent of California's foster children are assigned CASA volunteers – a percentage that has not grown appreciably in the past five years. These questions are designed to help the judicial officers review the local CASA program.

1. What percentage of children in dependency in your county are represented by CASAs?

Statewide answer: Of the approximately 10 million children in California at the end of 2007, about 81,000 were in foster care. At the same time, about 3,600 CASA volunteers were actively representing about 5,000 children and youth – about 70 percent of whom were children in foster care (the remaining 30 percent were non-foster care dependency cases, delinquency cases, and in a few instances child custody and probate cases). That means about 5 percent of the children in foster care are being represented by traditional CASAs at any one time.

The goal: The California Blue Ribbon Commission on Children in Foster Care has recommended that state funding for CASA programs be expanded to provide advocacy for every child in foster care.

2. Are there any groups of children in dependency that are underrepresented by CASAs?

Statewide answer: Approximately equal percentages of boys and girls are represented by CASAs. CASA children tend to be older as compared with the general population of children in foster care. Hispanic, Black, and Native American children are underrepresented by CASAs. In addition, Black and Native American children are overrepresented in the dependency population, a situation that gets worse as children move into long-term foster care and institutional care (see tables at end).

The goal: Consistent with the individual needs of children and the need to appropriately match volunteers with children, assign CASA representatives to children in proportion to their representation in the dependency population.

3. What is the composition and skill set of the board of directors of your local CASA program?

Statewide answer: Board of directors range in size from 4 to 23 members, with a median size of 10. Overall, 57 percent of board members are female and 43 percent male, however, 17 out of 40 programs (including most of the larger programs) have boards fairly evenly split between males and females. Eighty percent of board members are White, while only 7 percent each are Black or Hispanic (see tables, at end).

The goal: Develop more diverse boards and strive to ensure that new board members bring specific skills such as financial knowledge, organizational management, community access, or fundraising to the position. More diverse boards can bring access to volunteers from currently underrepresented communities, and directors with needed skill sets can provide expertise to help expand the program.

4. What is the background and tenure of your CASA program director?

Statewide answer: Most CASA program directors have completed a bachelor's or master's degree and have prior experience in nonprofit management (56 percent) or private business management (41 percent). Approximately one-third of the directors have less than 1 year on the job, another third have between 1 and 4 years, and the final third have between 4 and 19 years. About half of the directors have spent 2 years or less time in the position. In 2007, 30 percent of the CASA director positions turned over.

The goal: Increase program director retention. Interviews indicated that in order to be effective in building the board and expanding the program, CASA directors need both management experience and at least two years in the director position. Programs should aim to keep directors well beyond the two-year mark.

5. What are the number, demographics, and duties of your CASA staff?

Statewide answer: Programs ranged from having no full time staff (5 programs) to having 28 full time staff. The median number of full time staff was 4 in 2007. The staff turnover rate in 2007 was about 18 percent. About one-third of the programs added staff (usually 1 full time equivalent), while about 60 percent had no growth. Staff was somewhat more diverse than the directors or volunteers: 65 percent White, 19 percent Hispanic, and 7 percent Black (see tables, at end). The staff-to-volunteer ratio ranged from 5 to 50, with the median being 27.

The goal: Increase staff retention and increase the total number and diversity of staff – particularly those who supervise and train volunteers. Increasing the number of volunteers

requires increasing the number of staff – the recommended ratio of volunteers to staff supervisors is 45 to 1.

6. How many active CASA volunteers do you have and what are their demographics?

Statewide answer: At the end of 2007, about 3,600 CASA volunteers were actively representing children in California. Sixty percent of CASA volunteers were over the age of 50, three-quarters were women, and 86 percent were White. Almost 60 percent of CASA volunteers worked, with 40 percent reporting full time jobs. Two-thirds of CASAs represented only one child, and half of those who represented more than one child said they represented a sibling group.

The goal: Increase the number of active volunteers and broaden the racial/ethnic diversity of CASA volunteers in a manner that more closely matches the children in need of representation. A diverse volunteer pool can bring both children and the program access to more diverse community resources and help expand the program by opening the doors to new funding pools, recruitment opportunities, board members, and staff.

7. What is your CASA volunteer retention rate?

Statewide answer: The annual CASA turnover rate is about 25 percent – in other words, programs need to recruit and train about 25 percent of their volunteers each year just to stay even. In 2007, CASA volunteers had an average of 31 months of CASA experience across all programs. A good deal of that experience, however, resides in the 25 percent of CASAs who have been representatives for five years or more.

The goal: Increase the volunteer retention rate, with special regard to encouraging volunteers to accept representation of another child after their initial representation is concluded.

8. What support does your CASA program provide for volunteers?

Statewide answer: The most common types of support provided by programs are assistance with preparing court reports, individualized support to volunteers by case supervisors, and special trainings beyond the minimum required CASA orientation and continuing education. The least common types of support were logistical support, payment of mileage expense, and help with arranging visits with the child. (see tables, at end).

The goal: Increase financial support for the work of volunteers. CASA programs appear to be doing an excellent job of training and supervising their volunteers. Increased material support, such as covering mileage and other expenses, may make volunteering more feasible for a wider range of individuals.

9. Is there adequate communication between the CASA program, the court, and community partners?

Statewide answer: Overall, CASA programs were generally satisfied with the frequency and quality of their interactions with the court and community partners. Direct and ongoing support from the court was frequently noted as being crucial to program success. In some cases, relationships with partners such as the department of social services and minor's counsel could be difficult.

The goal: Regular communication with the court and community partners should be a normal practice. Participation in trainings and seminars with court and community partners can greatly facilitate productive interactions.

10. Does your CASA program have a detailed growth plan with specific, linked goals for: children represented, volunteers, staff, board membership, and funding?

Statewide answer: Only a small percentage of programs statewide have developed detailed, multi-year growth plans. Those that have the plans point to the need to build a supportive board of directors before embarking on such a plan and to involve the board in its writing and implementation.

The goal: Each program should take the steps necessary to develop, implement, and periodically evaluate a long-term strategic growth plan with specific goals for both fundraising and the representation of children.

11. Where is the relationship between the judicial officer and the CASA program defined?

Answer: California Rule of Court 5.655. Program requirements for Court Appointed Special Advocates.

How can I become involved?

In addition to helping programs achieve the goals described above, judicial officers can become involved with:

- Developing, implementing, and monitoring effective assignment criteria for CASAs;
- Helping recruit a larger and more diverse pool of CASA volunteers; and
- Informing people about the value of CASAs through public forums and similar events.

Tables

Table 1. Ages of Children and Youth

Age Group	CASA Study	Foster Care	California
Under 1 year	Below 1%	5%	5%
1-2 years	3%	11%	9%
3-5 years	5%	13%	14%
6-10 years	20%	19%	23%
11-15 years	40%	28%	25%
16-17 years	27%	18%	10%
18-20 years	5%	5%	15%
Total number	695	81,946	11,709,577

Percentage calculations do not include 'Missing'.
Data Sources: CASA and the Courts Assessment 2007,
Volunteer survey; CWS/CMS 2007 Quarter 4 Extract.

Figure 1. Volunteer Age

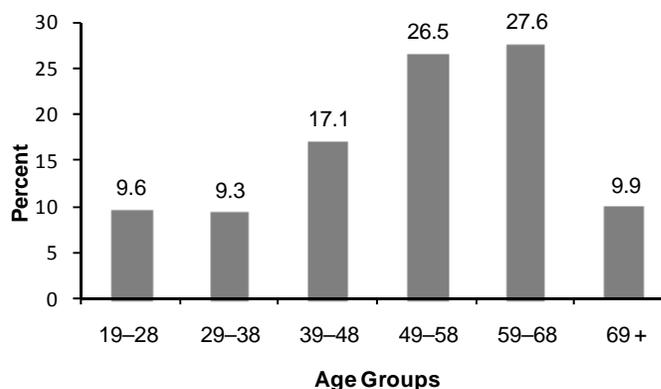


Table 2. Race/Ethnicity of CASA and Children in California 2007

Race/Ethnicity	CASA Board Members	CASA Staff	CASA Volunteers	CASA Children in Study	Children in Foster Care	Children in California
Native American	0.7%	2%	1%	3%	above 1%	below 1%
Asian/Pacific Islander	2%	6%	2%	3%	2%	10%
Black	7%	7%	4%	24%	27%	6%
Hispanic	7%	19%	6%	34%	45%	48%
White	80%	65%	86%	36%	24%	31%
Total Number	455	327	695	695	81,946	10,007,501

Table 3. Types Of Support Given By Program To Volunteers

Type of support	Percentage of CASAs
Prepare court reports	83%
Individualized support	83%
Special trainings	72%
Assist with service referrals	60%
Extracurricular activities for children	58%
Volunteer appreciation events	56%
Facilitate connections to social workers	55%
Volunteer support groups	48%
Facilitate connections to lawyers	38%
Logistical support	34%
Investigation support	29%
Mileage expense	16%
Assist with arranging visits with child	15%

Methodology

Data presented in this summary come from a statewide survey of program directors and a survey of a sample of volunteers statewide. All 41 CASA programs responded to the directors survey. The volunteer survey was sent to a random sample of approximately 1,200 active volunteers (about 1/3 of the State's total) covering all 41 CASA programs. Active volunteers were defined as those currently having at least one child, or having closed a case within the past three months. Fifty seven percent (695) of the selected volunteers responded to the survey. Volunteers were asked questions about themselves, their child (if they had more than one child, the one they knew best), their activities, and their CASA programs. Five local programs also participated in more in-depth qualitative investigations into their services. Each program contributed one focus group of volunteers, one focus group of juvenile court judicial officers, one interview with the CASA director, focus groups or interviews with CASA staff, and one community partners focus group. Two programs contributed focus groups of CASA youth.

This data was collected between August 2007 and January 2008. Additional data collected by the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) include quarterly data submissions from local programs, outcomes data from programs that has been collected since 2004, annual data on volunteer recruitment and training, annual salary surveys of CASA staff, and review letters sent following evaluative site visits. Data about children in foster care in California generally, as well as the California child population, was taken from the Child Welfare Dynamic Report System website, a California Department of Social Services / University of California at Berkeley collaboration: Needell, B., Webster, D., Armijo, M., Lee, S., Dawson, W., Magruder, J., Exel, M., Glasser, T., Williams, D., Zimmerman, K., Simon, V., Putnam-Hornstein, E., Frerer, K., Ataie, Y., Winn, A., Blumberg, R., & Cuccaro-Alamin, S. (2008). Child Welfare Services Reports for California. Retrieved August 2008, from University of California at Berkeley Center for Social Services Research website. URL: <http://cssr.berkeley.edu/ucb_childwelfare>

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