

## JUVENILE COURT CORNER: WHY IS CASA SO IMPORTANT FOR OUR JUVENILE COURTS ?

CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) is a program that trains and supervises citizen volunteers who are appointed by the juvenile court judge to speak on behalf of one child who is under court jurisdiction. From its creation by a juvenile court judge in 1977, CASA programs have spread throughout the United States with approximately 1,000 CASA programs across the country. In California there are slightly less than 4,000 CASA volunteers actively assisting about 5,000 dependent children (a little over 5% of California's population of dependent children). Moreover, the CASA programs in California are not growing.

The Court Appointed Special Advocates are trained volunteers from the community who serve the court by working with one child and reporting to the court the needs of that child. Their principle concern is the best interests of the child. Their functions include investigating the people involved in the child's life, reviewing court documents, understanding the child's needs, facilitating communication and collaboration among the professionals, appearing at court hearings, reporting to the court, informing the court of important developments, bringing to the professional's and the court's attention health, education, and other critical issues in the child's life.

The most enthusiastic supporters of CASA programs are judges. Judges know that social workers, attorneys, and guardians ad litem are not going to be able to address all of a child's needs - they all have multiple clients on their caseloads. Judges realize that the CASA volunteer brings the attention and energy of a dedicated volunteer who will help the court make the best possible decisions about the child's life.

For a video containing a collection of judge's statements about the value of CASA volunteers go to [http://www.national-casa.org/JudgesPage/judges\\_corner.htm](http://www.national-casa.org/JudgesPage/judges_corner.htm)). If you want a copy of the DVD, email me at [edwardsleonard@comcast.net](mailto:edwardsleonard@comcast.net).

CASA volunteers are unique - they have just one child and they will not rotate or be reassigned, they will remain with that child throughout the time the child's case is before the court.

A recent study of the California dependency system by the AOC asked questions of all participants in the process including many foster children. The results of the study were very revealing.

(1) To the question Who Do You Most Trust in the juvenile dependency court, the foster youth answered the CASA volunteer! Not the judge, not their attorney, not the social worker, but the CASA. Why did they give this answer? Because they knew that the CASA is the only unpaid person in the court system.

(2) To the question, Who is the Most Effective Person for You in the court system, the foster youth answered the CASA volunteer!! Again, they based this on their experience and the fact that the CASA volunteer was the most accessible person to them, the most responsive and the most effective. (For a copy of this report contact the AOC and ask for Research Summary, Court Appointed Special Advocates and the Courts: An Assessment, November 2008.) Judicial officers supplemented this opinion describing CASAs as providing timely, accurate information through well-written reports and court appearances, to help the judicial officers make decisions and assessing whether their orders were being followed.

The California Blue Ribbon Commission on Foster Care completed its comprehensive study of California's foster youth in 2008. Their recommendations and implementation plans were unanimously adopted by the California Judicial Council in 2008. One of the important recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Commission was that CASA programs be created and expanded statewide so that a CASA volunteer will be available for every child in the dependency system.

Standard 5.40 of the California Standards of Judicial Administration urges juvenile court judges to take various actions to identify, develop, and coordinate services for at-risk youth in the community. There is no question that CASA is the most effective and cost-efficient "service" that any community has developed.

Every county in the state should have a CASA program. Some counties may want to share a program with a neighboring county. Every juvenile court judge should support the creation and/or the growth of CASA programs in his or her county. Just because your county has a program is not enough. Only a handful of counties have a CASA for every dependent child. To assist you to get to know your local CASA program better, the AOC has prepared a short "Judicial Primer" listing the top 10 questions a judge should ask the local CASA program. Contact me for a copy.

That is the goal!! Every child deserves the best that we can provide for him or her, and a CASA is a proven means for assisting the court accomplish that goal.

*Judge Leonard Edwards, Santa Clara Superior Court (Ret.)*

