



NATIONAL COURT APPOINTED SPECIAL ADVOCATE (CASA) ASSOCIATION

Evaluation of Court Appointed Special Advocates/ Guardians ad Litem Volunteer Impact – Judicial Survey

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

œ In a system where the real parties of interest – the children – are underrepresented, I find CASA advocates are not only helpful, but essential to a good outcome.

-- Judge from Northeast Region; involved with CASA/GAL program for 3–5 years

KEY FINDINGS

- On average, **47.9% of the judges’ dependency cases are assigned to a CASA/GAL volunteer.** Assignment rates are higher in jurisdictions where volunteers are “*Parties to Cases*” and that are situated in *Rural* areas, but considerably lower among *Northeastern* judges.
- Though judges **consider a wide range of factors when assigning advocacy to a case**, they are most likely to consider: *instability of the current placement, conflicting case information, concerns about implementation of services, and extreme neglect, physical or sexual abuse.* They are less likely to consider: *parental incarceration and number of siblings.*
- Judges report that **CASA/GAL volunteers’ activities are very useful**, that their input in informing court decisions is **valued**, and that volunteers are **very effective** in supporting court processes.
- Judges frequently **incorporate CASA/GAL volunteer recommendations into the hearing court order.** Over 70 percent responded to a question about this issue with a ‘4’ or ‘5’ on a five-point scale ranging from ‘1-almost never’ to ‘5-almost always’. Judges where volunteers are “*Parties to Cases*” are more likely to incorporate recommendations into the court order.
- There is general concern about the **availability of CASA/GAL volunteers for Court caseloads.** Only 5.6% of judges “strongly agree” that there are *sufficient CASA/GAL volunteers* to meet their caseloads.
- Judges agree that the work of the CASA/GAL volunteers has been of **high quality, is beneficial to their decision making, and is beneficial to the children and families they serve.**

BACKGROUND

Purpose. To evaluate the impact of Court Appointed Special Advocates/ Guardians ad Litem (CASA/GAL) volunteers and program activities on judicial decision making, court processes and case outcomes.

Process. Data to inform this evaluation were collected by surveying active judges and juvenile court commissioners that hear juvenile dependency cases and are connected to a local CASA/GAL program and/or work with CASA/GAL volunteers. 2,288 surveys were mailed out and 564 judges completed the survey for a response rate of 24.6%.

Survey Tool. Survey questions addressed demographic characteristics of respondents and jurisdictions they serve, factors considered in assigning CASA/GAL advocacy to a case, roles CASA/GAL volunteers play in supporting judicial decision making and court processes, and satisfaction with local CASA/GAL programs and volunteers.

Intended Uses. Survey results will be used to improve services provided by CASA/GAL programs and volunteers, and to provide information on how volunteers are utilized.

METHODOLOGY

Sample Identification: Judicial names and addresses were compiled from multiple sources.

Target Sample: Judges presiding over juvenile dependency cases AND working in jurisdictions served by a CASA program.

Survey Administration: 2,288 judges and commissioners received the survey and were given the option of completing a paper survey or responding online. The overall response rate was 24.6% (564).

Sample Characteristics:

- Over 54% of the respondents serve *Rural* jurisdictions; 43% serve *Urban* jurisdictions; 28.9% serve *Suburban* jurisdictions; 2.1% serve *Tribal communities*.
- On average, the responding judges have been *hearing juvenile/family court dependency cases* for 10.1 years and have been *involved with the CASA/GAL program* for 8.9 years.

Methods of Analysis:

- Examination of frequencies and means, comparisons of sample sub-groups (e.g., cross-tabs);
- Tests of statistical significance (e.g., independent samples t-test, Chi-Square, analyses of variance); and
- Computation of indices.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO NATIONAL CASA

- **Continue to work with local CASA/GAL programs in providing useful and relevant services to the local jurisdictions.** Judges are highly satisfied with the work of the CASA/GAL programs and volunteers and value their input and recommendations. Work with the local programs in their efforts to improve services, expand their volunteer base and collaborate effectively with the local court jurisdictions.
- **Utilize the information about relevant factors for advocacy selection in helping local programs work more efficiently with the local jurisdictions.** There is variability in the extent to which various factors are considered in the decisions about case advocacy. Help local programs share information about what the volunteers can do for the local jurisdictions and in which situations these volunteers might be of greatest assistance.
- **Use the study findings to tailor training, communication and coordination efforts in local jurisdictions.** Local judicial systems are unique in regard to the relevant laws, procedures, processes, and statutes that influence judicial decision making. Local CASA programs and volunteers must understand as much as possible about the local environment to maintain strong connections to the local jurisdiction.
- **Continue with efforts to recruit and retain local CASA/GAL volunteers.** The only real area of dissatisfaction with local CASA programs is that there are not “sufficient CASA/GAL volunteers to meet the caseloads.” Explore ways that local programs and judicial representatives can work together to recruit and retain volunteers.
- **Examine differences in patterns among those judges working with the program using a “Parties to Cases” model versus a “Friend of the Court” model.** Judges report that volunteers who are “Parties to Cases” provide greater input to the court decisions and are more likely to have recommendations incorporated into the hearing’s court order. Determine if this distinction is important in helping local programs better serve the overall interests of the Court.
- **Encourage the development of a comprehensive national database of juvenile court dependency judges for continuing education and advocacy purposes.**
- **Expand National CASA’s knowledge of program impacts and efficacy through on-going research efforts.**

☞ CASA needs more financial support in order to recruit/monitor more CASAs and to sustain a larger program.

-- Judge from Mountain Plains Region involved with CASA/GAL program for 6 – 10 years

This Executive Summary was prepared by Organizational Research Services for National CASA. For further information on evaluation methods and data, contact: Marc Bolan, Ph.D. or Hallie Goertz, MPA, Organizational Research Services, Seattle, WA. 206.728.0474 www.organizationalresearch.com

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