

Information about the CASA Organization

Each year, thousands of abused or neglected children in Contra Costa County come under the court's care because they are unable to live safely at home. Imagine what it would be like to lose your parents, not because of something you did, but because they cannot – or will not – take care of and protect you. Then into the lives of these children come dozens of strangers: police, foster parents, social workers, judges, lawyers and more. For some, one of these may be a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteer.

CASA volunteers watch over and advocate for abused and neglected children to make sure they do not get lost in the over-burdened legal system or languish in an inappropriate group or foster home. CASA volunteers help reduce delays and continuances and stay with each case until it is closed and the child is placed in a safe, permanent home. CASA volunteers maintain ongoing communication with all parties involved in each case to best serve the child's interests and best identify and address the child's needs. For many children, their CASA volunteer may be the one constant adult presence – the one adult who cares only for them and provides companionship and consistency. For the volunteer, this means a commitment of a minimum of two years and 15-20 hours per month.

Because of the enormous number of cases filed in juvenile dependency court and dwindling resources to adequately investigate cases, judges are often compelled to make permanency-planning decisions based on less than complete or objective information. Out of a dire need to have more information about the children appearing before him, in 1977 Juvenile Court Judge John Soukup created CASA in Seattle, Washington.

Our agency was the fourth to be formed and has been serving Contra Costa County's most needy children since 1981. A member of both the National and California CASA Associations, our CASA program operates under the authority of and according to guidelines established by the Judicial Council, as outlined in the *California State Welfare and Institutions Code*, and in Rule 5.655 of the *California Rules of Court*.

In addition to our services to abused and neglected children, the CASA program works to provide community education and awareness concerning the issues of child abuse, neglect and child welfare policy. We are also committed to working towards public policies that promote child abuse prevention and address reforms in juvenile dependency/foster care.

Specific Duties, Role and Responsibilities of the Individual CASA

A CASA volunteer is appointed to a child or sibling group by a court order of the presiding judge of the juvenile dependency court.

This court order states that the CASA volunteer:

- Shall investigate circumstances surrounding the case.
- Shall, upon presentation of the court order, have access to available records and files of the court and Children & Family Services agency, as well as school and medical records and those of any agency relating to the child.
- Shall submit a timely written report to the court as to the results of this investigation.
- Shall have access to spending time alone with the child.
- Shall not disclose any information received in connection with his/her investigation of the case unless specifically authorized by the court.
- Shall be given notice of and be authorized to attend all court hearings and other proceedings regarding the child.
- Shall have access to all reports from the social worker prior to court hearings.
- Shall follow the directions and orders of the court and provide information specifically requested by the court and/or CASA Case Management.

Specific Duties, Role and Responsibilities of the Individual CASA (continued)

The goal of the CASA program is to prevent abused and neglected children from becoming lost in the juvenile dependency system. When matching a CASA volunteer with a child, the objective is to ensure that the child's best interest is represented. The volunteer has four essential roles as an advocate:

1. To be the child's voice in court, representing his/her best interests.
2. To assist the juvenile court by researching and assessing the circumstances of each case and report their recommendations and findings.
3. To continue to monitor the progress of the case as it moves through the system.
4. To become a mentor and a source of support for the child.

The CASA's ultimate goal is to move the child out of temporary placement into a safe and permanent home. This could mean reunification with the parents, adoption, the appointment of a legal guardian, or some other permanent living arrangement that satisfies the court and fulfills the child's needs.

Application and Selection Process

For the protection of our volunteers and the children they work with, this is a thorough, in-depth process. To be selected, the applicant will:

- Complete an application form.
- Provide a copy of their current driver license, automobile insurance and DMV driving record.
- Provide three letters of references.
- Successfully complete a personal interview.
- Pass FBI/California DOJ Live Scan fingerprinting and Megan's Law sex offender database screening.

Initial Training Process

After acceptance into the CASA program, the volunteer completes mandatory classroom training taught by CASA staff and professionals of at least 30 hours. Topics include the juvenile court process, family dynamics, educational advocacy and much more. Mandatory training includes a visit to juvenile court, which takes place during the workweek in the morning hours.

Case Assignment

When all mandatory training is complete, the new CASA volunteer meets with Case Management to determine his/her first case assignment. After reviewing the case information and court reports, the volunteer consults with CASA program staff to develop a case plan. Prior to each court hearing, the volunteer prepares a court report containing their own evaluations and recommendations for the child.

Ongoing Education/In-Service Training

CASA volunteers are encouraged to keep abreast of the latest information regarding child abuse and litigation and are required to complete a minimum of twelve (12) hours per year of continuing education. Reading relevant books and/or magazines, and attending workshops and seminars offered by CASA and other organizations are two of the many ways to fulfill this continuing education requirement.

The CASA Advocate Resource Center, located in the CASA office, is a library available for your use and reference. All books are available for checkout by CASA volunteers. We recommend the following book for the newcomer to learn more about child abuse and the juvenile dependency system.

- *I Speak for This Child: True Stories of a Child Advocate*, by Gay Courter

Do You Have What it Takes to be a CASA Volunteer?

CASA volunteers come from varied backgrounds. Their ages span from 21 to over 70 years, and their education ranges from high school to doctorate degrees. Some work full or part-time, some are students, some are homemakers and some are retired. The following is a composite picture drawn from the profiles of active CASA volunteers.

Chris is 41, married with two children, has a bachelor's degree and works in the marketing department of a local business. Wanting to give something back to the community and help children, Chris called the local volunteer center and felt the CASA organization was a match for him. He understood the commitment of a minimum of two years and 15-20 hours per month.

Early in August, Chris called the CASA agency. After a few preliminary questions were answered, Chris was referred to the website cccocasa.org where he found all the information he needed in the "Becoming A Volunteer" link and downloaded the volunteer application. It took Chris a week to gather all the required items, contact three references and complete the application. By mid August, he mailed back his completed application together with copies of his driver license, DMV driving record and auto insurance coverage. He had also contacted and mailed an *Authorization to Release Information/Reference* form located in the application package to each of his three selected references.

On August 15, Chris received a call from CASA and his interview was scheduled for August 18. The interviewers asked many questions to learn more about the prospective applicant. The questions included topics such as childhood experiences, attitudes about abuse and neglect, experience in working with children as well as clarification of some items Chris completed on his application.

Chris was given a Live Scan fingerprint form together with a list of locations that provide Live Scan service. The interviewer explained that Megan's Law sex offender database would be checked, requested that Chris have the Live Scan fingerprints processed **before** the start of his training and to get the "second copy-requesting agency" of the form back to the CASA office. Chris was provided with the dates and times of planned training sessions. The entire process took approximately 1.5 hours and Chris left the interview knowing that he had been accepted into the training program.

Chris then made an appointment to have his fingerprints taken. Having passed the written application, screening and interview process, Chris felt quite proud and ready to accept the challenges ahead of him.

Chris enjoyed the training program and got to know others in the class. Several professionals from the community and active CASA volunteers provided real-life information for the trainees. The training provided Chris with the knowledge that he required about the legal system, child development, dynamics of abuse and neglect, and required paperwork and reports. During training, Chris completed a visit to juvenile court.

When Chris had completed the mandatory training he called the CASA office and made an appointment with Case Management to discuss cases he might be assigned. A match was found and Chris accepted a case involving a 14-year-old boy. Chris received a packet of information from Case Management, including the name and telephone numbers of the social worker and attorney who were assigned to the case. In the case documents, Chris learned that the boy was in a foster home after having been physically abused by his father. Chris and Case Management reviewed and agreed on the actions Chris would take to begin work on his first case.

Chris was assigned to a Team Leader who would be his CASA coach "in the field", to support and work with him as he begins his journey as a CASA volunteer.

CASA Volunteer Information Package

Check List for Receipt of Enclosed Items

1. Introductory information about the CASA Program (two pages).
2. *Do You Have What it Takes to be a CASA Volunteer?*
3. *Check List for Receipt of Enclosed Items and Items to be Returned with Your Application.*
4. *Authorization to Release Information* form with reference form on reverse (three copies – total of six pages if downloaded from the website). To be sent to each of your three named references.
5. *CASA Volunteer Application Form.*
6. Dates of the next CASA training.

Items to be Returned with Your Application

All of the following items must be returned with your application to:

CASA of Contra Costa County
2020 North Broadway, Suite 204
Walnut Creek, CA 94596
Attention: Recruitment and Training

1. Completed application form.
2. A copy of your current California driver license.
3. A copy of your DMV driving record. Obtained either in person or online from DMV. Fee applies.
4. Copy of your current automobile insurance coverage showing expiration date.

When contacting your three selected named references, explain the following:

- You will provide them with an *Authorization to Release Information* form with a reference questionnaire for them to complete and return to CASA.
- They should send their information, as soon as possible, in the envelope you have provided directly to:

CASA of Contra Costa County
2020 North Broadway, Suite 204
Walnut Creek, CA 94596
Attention: Recruitment and Training

AUTHORIZATION TO RELEASE INFORMATION

*(Applicant: Please give this to the person serving as a reference for you.
Ask them to return it to CASA in the envelope you have provided.)*

To: _____
Name

I, _____ request and authorize you and/or your organization to furnish to Court Appointed Advocates (CASA) of Contra Costa County, any and all information you have concerning me. I am authorizing for release all confidential and privileged information.

This information is necessary to assist in determining my suitability and qualifications for a volunteer position I am seeking with CASA that entails my working with abused and neglected children. Because children will be entrusted to my care, it is important that CASA learn and verify everything possible about me. It is for the children's protection that these background inquiries are so detailed and probing.

I fully understand the information you provide may be of a sensitive, confidential and privileged nature, and could reflect negatively on my suitability. I hereby release you, your organization and all others from liability and damage that may result from furnishing the requested information to CASA. Furthermore, I acknowledge that the information you provide to them will be kept confidential, available only to CASA staff.

Any questions relating to the release of information about me should be directed to (925) 256-7284.

Signed: _____ Dated: _____

.....
To whom it may concern:

The person sending you this form has applied to work as a volunteer in the Contra Costa County Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) program and has listed you as a reference. Please give your written assessment of the applicant's ability to serve as a volunteer in our program. You may use the form on the reverse side of this letter.

To help you in your evaluation of the applicant for this program, we offer the following brief description:

A CASA volunteer is appointed by the juvenile dependency court judge to advocate for children who have been abused or neglected. The CASA gathers information from interviews with professionals and others involved in the child's life. Based on their investigation, observations, experience, interactions with the child, and the family members, the CASA makes a formal report with recommendations to the court on what they believe to be in the best interest of the child.

CASA volunteer work demands a high degree of responsibility and commitment to the well being of children. It is essential that the CASA volunteer have the ability to relate to people from many different walks of life and remain objective in their evaluations.

Thank you for responding to this request promptly. Your participation will enhance our evaluation of the applicant. If you have any questions, please call me at (925) 256-7284.

Charles Mead
Executive Director
Court Appointed Advocates (CASA) of Contra Costa County
2020 N. Broadway, Suite 204
Walnut Creek, CA 94596-3756

Reference for: _____ Date: _____

Relationship to prospective volunteer: _____ Years known: _____

1. Check as many of the following that you feel best describes the applicant:

- | | | | | |
|---|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Outgoing | <input type="checkbox"/> Shy | <input type="checkbox"/> Cooperative | <input type="checkbox"/> Uncooperative | <input type="checkbox"/> Opinionated |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Patient | <input type="checkbox"/> Impatient | <input type="checkbox"/> Considerate | <input type="checkbox"/> Rigid | <input type="checkbox"/> Well-adjusted |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lacks confidence | <input type="checkbox"/> Unhappy | <input type="checkbox"/> Creative | <input type="checkbox"/> Unimaginative | <input type="checkbox"/> Aggressive |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Confident | <input type="checkbox"/> Happy | <input type="checkbox"/> Stable | <input type="checkbox"/> Unstable | <input type="checkbox"/> Passive |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Even-tempered | <input type="checkbox"/> Moody | <input type="checkbox"/> Leader | <input type="checkbox"/> Follower | <input type="checkbox"/> Assertive |

2. Have you observed the applicant's interaction with children? Yes No If yes, rate the applicant's relationship to children (check all that apply):

- Impatient Understanding Friendly Stern

Other (specify): _____

3. Do you consider the applicant emotionally stable? Yes No

4. To your knowledge, has the applicant ever had a drug or alcohol problem? Yes No

5. Would the applicant have problems working with the following individuals?

- Physical/medical/mental disability Different race Different sex Different religion Other

Please explain: _____

6. How would you rate the applicant's ability to be objective, non-judgmental of other's behavior or lifestyles?

- Very accepting Critical Somewhat bothered by differences

7. To your knowledge, has the applicant ever been asked to leave a program where they worked with children? Yes No

If yes, please explain: _____

8. Would you feel comfortable having the applicant relate to a child of your own, or a child close to you?

9. How would you rate the applicant's ability to handle confidential information? Stable Unstable Unknown

10. Please rate applicant on the following characteristics:

	ABOVE AVERAGE	AVERAGE	BELOW AVERAGE	DON'T KNOW
Assumes responsibility				
Takes initiative				
Completes tasks				
Positive attitude				
Flexible				
Attention to detail				
Ability to work with others (team player)				
Accepts supervision willingly				
Oral communication				
Written communication				

11. Please comment on applicant's qualities that you feel would help make him/her a good CASA volunteer (*use additional paper if necessary*): _____

Name of person completing this form: _____ Telephone: _____

Address: _____

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2. Have you observed the applicant's interaction with children? Yes No If yes, rate the applicant's relationship to children (check all that apply):

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Other (specify): _____

3. Do you consider the applicant emotionally stable? Yes No

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5. Would the applicant have problems working with the following individuals?

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Please explain: _____

6. How would you rate the applicant's ability to be objective, non-judgmental of other's behavior or lifestyles?

- Very accepting Critical Somewhat bothered by differences

7. To your knowledge, has the applicant ever been asked to leave a program where they worked with children? Yes No

If yes, please explain: _____

8. Would you feel comfortable having the applicant relate to a child of your own, or a child close to you?

9. How would you rate the applicant's ability to handle confidential information? Stable Unstable Unknown

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Positive attitude				
Flexible				
Attention to detail				
Ability to work with others (team player)				
Accepts supervision willingly				
Oral communication				
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