

## **THE ROLE OF A MUSKEGON CASA VOLUNTEER**

### **What is a CASA volunteer?**

A Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteer is a trained citizen who is appointed by the Court to represent the best interest of a child who is involved in the court system because they have been abused or neglected.

### **What is the CASA volunteer's role?**

A CASA volunteer independently investigates the circumstances surrounding a child's court case. Each case is as unique as the child involved. The CASA volunteer uses this information to objectively determine what is in a child's best interest; whether to stay with his or her parents or guardians; be placed in foster care, or be freed for permanent adoption. The CASA volunteer makes a placement recommendation to the court, attends court hearings in order to clarify or elaborate on the report submitted, and follows through on the case until it is permanently resolved. In addition, a CASA must maintain accurate, thorough records, regularly communicate case status with the program director, comply with necessary deadlines and timetables, and complete program evaluations.

### **How does a CASA volunteer assess a case?**

To prepare a recommendation, the CASA volunteer talks with the child, parents, family members, social workers, school officials, health providers and others who are knowledgeable about the child's history. The CASA volunteer also reviews all records pertaining to the child -- school, medical and caseworker reports: as well as other relevant documents. The CASA does collaborate with the other active participants in the child welfare system. However, the entire focus of the CASA volunteer is exclusively what is in the best interest of the child. Continuous objectivity, confidentiality, and professionalism are essential in every aspect of a CASA's role.

### **How does a CASA volunteer differ from a social service caseworker?**

Social service caseworkers generally are employed by state governments. These workers sometimes have as many as 30 to 50 children on their caseload at a time and are frequently unable to conduct a comprehensive investigation of each. The CASA volunteer has only one case (a case is one family). The CASA volunteer does not replace a caseworker on a case; he or she is an independent appointee of the court. The CASA volunteer can thoroughly examine a child's case, has knowledge of community resources, and can make a recommendation to the court independent of state agency restrictions.

### **How does the role of a CASA volunteer differ from an attorney?**

The CASA volunteer does not provide legal representation in the courtroom. That is the role of the child's attorney, referred to as the lawyer-guardian ad litem (L-Gal). However, the CASA volunteer does provide crucial background information that assists L-Gals in presenting their cases. It is important to remember that a CASA volunteer will always relay a child's wishes to the Judge, but they make recommendations based on what is in the child's best interest.

### **Do lawyers, judges and social caseworkers support CASA?**

Yes. Juvenile and family court judges implement the CASA program in their courtrooms and appoint volunteers. CASA has been endorsed by the American Bar Association, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, and the National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators.

### **How effective have CASA programs been?**

Preliminary findings show that children who have been assigned CASA volunteers tend to spend less time in court and less time within the foster care system than those who do not have CASA representation. Judges have observed that CASA children also have better chances of finding permanent homes than non-CASA children.

### **Is there a “typical” CASA volunteer?**

CASA volunteers come from all walks of life, with a variety of professional, educational and ethnic backgrounds. There are more than 15,000 CASA volunteers nationally. Local programs vary in number of volunteers they utilize. Aside from their CASA volunteer work, 85 percent are employed in regular full-time jobs; the majority tends to be professionals. Two-thirds of the volunteers nationwide are women; one-third are men.

### **Can anyone volunteer to be a CASA?**

CASA volunteers are ordinary citizens. No special or legal background is required. However, volunteers are screened closely for objectivity, competence and commitment. We require personal references and conduct a criminal background check for each applicant. In order to be selected as a CASA volunteer, you must be at least 21 years old, have completed the required training, commit to the duration of a case, usually at least one year of service, and have transportation.

### **What training does a CASA volunteer receive?**

CASA volunteers undergo 40 hours of thorough training conducted by the local CASA program and are required to observe court proceedings as part of their training. They learn effective advocacy techniques for children, are educated about specific topics ranging from childhood development and adolescent behavior to the dynamics of abuse and neglect to substance abuse, and must become familiar with legal terms and court proceedings. CASA volunteers are required to obtain 12 hours of training each year to stay informed on various relative issues and topics.

### **How does the CASA volunteer relate to the child he or she represents?**

CASA volunteers offer children trust and advocacy during complex legal proceedings. They explain to the child the events that are happening, the reasons they are in court, and the roles the judge, lawyers, and caseworkers play. CASA volunteers also encourage the child to express his or her own opinion and hopes, while remaining objective observers. A CASA must create a healthy relationship with the child, while guarding against excessive emotional involvement.

### **How much time does it require?**

Each case is different. A CASA volunteer usually spends about 15 - 20 hours a month on their case doing research and conducting interviews. More involved and complicated cases may require more time. The volunteer continues until the case is permanently resolved – the case is closed or the child is made available for adoption. One of the primary benefits of the CASA program is that, unlike other court principals who often rotate cases, the CASA volunteer is a consistent figure in the proceedings, and provides continuity for a child.

### **Are there any other agencies or groups that provide the same service?**

No. There are other child advocacy organizations, but CASA is the only program where volunteers are appointed by the court to represent a child's best interests.



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