

THE ROLE OF A CASA

In Essex County, New Jersey there are nearly 3,000 children who have been removed from their homes and placed in foster care because of abuse, neglect or abandonment. Their cases are brought to court before a Family Court Judge who sometimes has only a few minutes to make critical life-altering decisions about their future. Can they be safely reunited with their parents? Are there relatives or family friends who can care for them? Should they be placed for adoption? Making decisions about the lives of children and families is a heavy burden. A Family Court Judge needs accurate and up-to-date information to make the right decision for a foster child. That's where Essex County CASA comes in!

Essex County Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) is an independent, court-authorized nonprofit organization that works through specially trained and supervised volunteers to promote the welfare of children in Essex County, New Jersey who have been removed from their homes because of abuse, neglect or abandonment. CASA serves as a foster child's "voice in court" working to ensure that needed services and assistance are made available while helping to move the child towards a safe and permanent home.

CASA helps to provide information to Family Court Judges by using trained community volunteers to investigate the background of a foster care case and make recommendations to the Judge that will best help to move the child to a safe and permanent home as quickly as possible. Whether the plan is reunification with the parents, placement with relatives/kin or adoption, a CASA volunteer remains diligently focused on the child's need for permanent placement until the goal is accomplished. CASA volunteers come from all walks of life and all kinds of educational, ethnic and social backgrounds. Most work full time and no special prior experience is required. Objectivity and good communication skills are essential since a CASA volunteer must be able to work with a variety of people from child welfare professionals to birth parents. The amount of time spent working on a case varies depending on the stage of the proceedings. Each CASA volunteer is partnered with a Case Supervisor and together they work on a case. Volunteers and their Case Supervisors communicate regularly, sharing information and developing and determining the steps to take on the case. All investigative work and reports to the Court or authorized agencies are undertaken together. On average, CASAs devote 10 to 15 hours a month to a case. A demonstrated sense of responsibility and commitment is important for our volunteers. CASA volunteers are responsible adults, at least 21 years of age, who care deeply about the welfare of children and know that when they take on a case, they take on a child's future!

A written application, personal interview, three references, criminal background check, fingerprinting and 33 hours of in-class training is required to become a CASA volunteer. Training topics include: The Law, The Child Protection System and the Courts; Children and Family Systems; The Impact of Child Abuse and Neglect; Exploring Our Cultural Sensitivity; Communication/Interviewing Skills; Information Gathering and Report Writing. Training sessions are offered 4 to 5 times a year in a combination of Saturday and weekday evening classes. Following the completion of training, volunteers are sworn in by a Family Court judge. After completing the in-class training sessions, volunteers have the opportunity to accompany a Case Supervisor to Court to observe the court hearing process. Post-training, CASA volunteers are required to participate in 12 hours of additional training each year. CASA offers a graduate series of seminars and workshops that are offered continually so that Advocates can meet this requirement. For more information about becoming a CASA volunteer, contact Carol Costello at 973-648-2814 or by email at ccostello@casaessex.org.

CASA FAQs

Q: What is a CASA volunteer?

A: CASA volunteers are community members who have a sincere desire to make a difference in the life of a child in foster care by becoming an advocate in court on the child's behalf. CASA volunteers come from all walks of life. Many work full or part time, some are students and some are retired. Although you must be at least 21 years old to volunteer, no legal expertise is necessary.

Q: How does a CASA volunteer advocate for a foster child?

A: As an advocate, a CASA volunteer will read DYFS case files and interview all parties associated with the child and the case such as biological parents, foster parents, school personnel, medical and mental health professionals and relatives. A CASA volunteer visits the child in the foster home every month in order to be familiar with what he or she needs. After gathering information, a CASA volunteer writes a report to be sent to the Family Court Judge who is presiding over the case. CASA volunteers are invited to appear at the actual Court hearing on the case to provide in-person testimony related to the report.

Q: How much time is required?

A: Most cases require approximately 5 hours per week.

Q: Do I come to an office to do my volunteer work?

A: No, CASA volunteers work out of their own homes or offices and set their own schedules.

Q: What if I need help?

A: CASA volunteers work in partnership with a Case Supervisor who is available for assistance Monday through Friday between the hours of 8:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. Your Case Supervisor will help with questions you may have, finding necessary resources, planning your investigation and providing any other necessary support.

Q: Can I still be a CASA volunteer if I work full time?

A: Absolutely! The time you spend as a CASA volunteer is scheduled at your own convenience. Many of our volunteers work full time and schedule appointments for evenings and weekends. Some flexibility is necessary for attendance at Court hearings and for meetings with DYFS Caseworkers.

Q: How long does a CASA volunteer remain involved with a case?

A: Each case is different, however a CASA volunteer remains appointed to the case until the permanent plan for the child is in place. A minimum commitment of one year is requested.

Q: Do I have to go into dangerous neighborhoods?

A: You are never required to go into any neighborhood where you feel uncomfortable. Interviews with biological parents and/or relatives of the child can be conducted at the DYFS office, the CASA office or any neutral site in the community such as the public library or a coffee shop.

Q: What can I do to help?

A: Volunteer your time to become a CASA for an abused or neglected child in foster care. If you cannot do that, you can still help by becoming a Friend of CASA. You can also support the work of other CASA volunteers by making a donation to CASA. It costs as little as \$1,200 to provide a full year of investigative and advocacy services to a child in foster care.

20-POINT CASE PRACTICE PROTOCOL FOR CASA VOLUNTEER ADVOCATES

The Essex County CASA program trains community volunteers to work with credentialed Case Supervisors to provide the following direct, court-related advocacy services to abused, neglected and abandoned children in out-of-home placement in Essex County. All CASA advocacy services are provided free of charge to this client population. For each CASA child, service objectives cover the following activities:

1. Interview and maintain contact with the foster child to monitor their progress in placement. CASA volunteers visit the child in the foster home a minimum of once a month.
2. Interview and maintain regular contact with foster parents to continuously assess the quality of the placement and whether it is appropriately meeting the child's needs.
3. Review DYFS case records on the child and family to develop an understanding of the family and individual child history.
4. Establish and maintain contact with the DYFS Case Manager. Share information and concerns about the child/family with the DYFS worker on an on-going basis.
5. Locate, interview and maintain periodic contact with birth parents to assess their ability and interest in providing a safe home for the child. Obtain personal histories on the birth parents. Observe one or more visitations between the parents and the child(ren).
6. Interview and maintain contact with available relatives to assess their ability and interest as placement resources for the child(ren). Request DYFS to initiate background checks as appropriate.
7. Locate and interview lost relatives.
8. Monitor the progress of birth parents toward reunification when this is the appropriate permanency goal for the child(ren). Document progress in problem resolution such as drug treatment, obtaining housing and counseling for specific case-related issues.
9. Obtain and review medical and/or hospital records as appropriate. Interview and maintain contact with medical professionals.
10. Obtain and review psychiatric/psychological records as appropriate. Interview and maintain contact with mental health professionals.
11. Obtain and review appropriate school records. Interview and maintain contact with teachers, counselors, the Child Study Team and other educational professionals.
12. Interview and maintain contact with any day care professionals providing services to the child.
13. Obtain and review records and interview personnel of any other agency which has been involved with the child(ren), parents or other parties in the case, where appropriate.
14. Identify the child's needs and appropriate services to meet these needs.
15. Advocate on behalf of the child in Court, in the child protective system and in the Child Placement Review system through written reports and in-person testimony. Typically there are three to four reports written and three to four hearings that must be attended within the first 15 months of a foster child's family court case.
16. Assist the child victim and foster family to obtain medical and other benefits to which they are entitled.
17. Provide an accountability check on DYFS delivery of services.
18. Formulate recommendations to guide the Court and DYFS regarding custody of the child, placement, visitation, service needs and permanency.
19. Coordinate the flow of case information to all appropriate interested parties, supplying accurate and timely information.
20. Facilitate the solution of problems inhibiting the delivery of services or the time progress of the case from the Court's first notification of out-of-home placement by DYFS until the final permanency goal has been achieved.