



# **Volunteer Policies and Procedures Handbook**

# Volunteer Policies and Procedures

## Roles and Responsibilities

### What is a CASA volunteer?

A CASA volunteer is a trained child advocate sworn in by the presiding judge to represent the best interests of children who have been abused and/or neglected and are active cases in the juvenile court system. The CASA volunteer researches the child's circumstances, provides fact-based information, and makes recommendations to the court while becoming a source of support for the child.

The CASA program is an independent non-profit, but works closely with the court, social workers, therapists, attorneys, care providers, and other professionals involved in a child's case. CASA volunteers work under the direct supervision of the CASA staff to further the child's welfare and to expedite their case through the system.

The CASA volunteer's ultimate goal is to move the child out of temporary placement, usually in the foster care system, into a safe and permanent home. This could mean return to the parent's care (reunification), adoption, the appointment of a legal guardian (guardianship), or some other permanent living arrangement that satisfies the court and fulfills the child's needs.

### A CASA volunteer shall....

- Report any incident of child abuse or neglect to the CASA Coordinator, DFCS child abuse hotline (1-855-GACHILD), and any other appropriate parties to the proceedings.
- Input complete records about the case, including appointments, interviews, observations, and other pertinent information into CASA's client management system, Optima.
- Determine if a permanent plan has been created for the child and whether appropriate services, including reasonable efforts, are being provided to the child(ren) and family.
- Ensure that the child's best interests are being represented in all facets of the case by attending court hearings, meetings involving the child(ren)/family, school meetings, writing timely court reports, and advocating verbally to parties involved.
- Monitor the case by visiting the child as often as necessary but at a minimum of once a month and contacting involved parties to observe whether the child's essential needs are being met and whether the court's orders are being followed.
- Remain actively involved in the case until formally discharged by the court and/or the CASA program.
- Input monthly documentation of case activities into Optima. CASA contact logs are due by the close of business day on the 1<sup>st</sup> of each month.
- Complete CASA reports for all necessary hearings within 1 week (7 days) prior to the hearing.

### A CASA volunteer shall NOT...

- Be related to any parties involved in the case or be employed in a position that might result in a conflict of interest. This includes being a foster parent.

- Provide direct services delivery to any parties that could lead to a conflict of interest or liability problems.
- Provide direct service delivery to any parties that could cause a child or a family to become dependent on the volunteer for services that should be provided by other agencies.
- Transport the child or family.
- Shelter a child in his/her home.
- Give legal advice or therapeutic advice.
- Give money or expensive gifts to the child or family.
- Have excessive or inappropriate contact with the child as determined by the coordinator.
- Become personal friends with clients associated with cases that includes be-friending them on social media outlets such as Instagram, Facebook, etc.
- Participate in any ex-parte communication (communication with the Judge that does not include all parties to the case).

### **Confidentiality**

- Volunteers must respect children's and families' rights to privacy in regard to personal information.
- Disclosure or verification of case information shall not be made to anyone who does not have a professional reason for receiving such information.
- No information shall be released to anyone not authorized to receive it, without the express written and dated consent of the party.
- Confidential information shall only be shared with professional staff at the CASA program, DFCS, and the court.
- Case records and notes shall be secured and kept in private and inaccessible to public view.
- Discussions of case-related material are not to be held in hallways, elevators, or other public places.
- It is the CASA volunteer's job to transmit the information it collects to the court. It is important to let all parties to a case know this at the beginning of the case.
- No one outside of CASA program staff may have access to a CASA volunteers' case records without a court order. Copies of the CASA volunteer's court report are provided prior to a court hearing to the DFCS case manager, judge, and attorneys appointed to the case. No one else is allowed access to the CASA court report unless ordered by the judge.
- When corresponding via email pertaining to CASA case specific/confidential information, CASA volunteer will utilize the CASA email provided to them (@savannahcasavols.org).

### **Volunteer Duties**

#### **Conduct an independent assessment**

- Review all relevant documents, including those of DFCS, police, court, medical, schools, etc.
- Conduct direct interviews with the child, parents, DFCS case managers, relatives, school personnel, and others having knowledge of the facts in the situation.
- Maintain complete written records about the case, including a log of appointments, interviews, and information gathered about the child, records reviewed, and time spent on the case.

- Determine if a permanent plan has been created for the child, and whether “reasonable efforts” were made to provide services to the child and family. Is the plan appropriate for the child?

#### **Determine the best interests of the child**

- Utilize as many factors as possible in determining the child’s best interests, including: current age and sense of time, level of maturity, culture and ethnicity, degree of attachment to family members and siblings, and what situation would best provide continuity, consistency and a sense of belonging and identity.
- Monitor the case by visiting the child as often as necessary to observe whether the child’s essential needs are being met and whether the court order is being carried out by the parents as well as involved agencies.
- Participate in any planning or treatment team meetings involving the child in order to keep informed of the child’s permanency plan. Seek cooperative solutions, if possible.
- Monitor the development and/or revisions of a case plan, ensuring inclusion of specific tasks with target dates for completion.
- Review the case plan with case managers and ask questions to ensure all child’s needs are being met by the plan. May suggest additional services.

#### **Advocate for the child**

- Ensure the child’s best interests are being represented at every stage of the case.
- Attend all court hearings.
- Make a written recommendation(s) to the court on what decision is best for the child in your CASA court report.
- Urge the court, through written reports, to enter specific clear orders for evaluation, assessment, services, and treatment for the child(ren) and the family.
- Point out concerns about the case to the court.
- Help the child understand the court process (if age appropriate)

#### **Additional Responsibilities**

- Remain actively involved in the case until formally discharged by the court. Once a case terminates and/or CASA volunteer is not longer assigned to it, all notes and other associated paperwork must be returned to the CASA office within 5 business days.
- Abide by all laws and regulations governing activities; conduct all business in an honest, fair, and professional, and humane manner; use authority appropriately; and do not use your role to promote a personal agenda or for personal gain.
- Respect the right to privacy by keeping information that would identify parties involved in cases confidential.
- Disqualify yourself from involvement in a case if you are related to any parties in the case, if your employment might result in a conflict of interest, or if for any other reason circumstances arise or you know parties well enough that it becomes impossible for you to remain impartial and/or unbiased.
- Failure to perform the above described duties or infractions of the prescribed ethical standards is reason to consider dismissal of the volunteer. Administrative policy is to aid and facilitate the

work of the volunteer and to openly discuss any problems and concerns with the volunteer, but at all times to establish and maintain the integrity and credibility of the CASA program.

- Be aware of cultural differences and respectful of those differences.

#### **Guidelines for contact with children**

- Visits and/or contact with children should occur monthly while assigned to a case. If a child(ren) are placed 3 hours away (one way), the requirement is only once every three months.
- Do not probe or introduce specifics of abuse. Be especially careful when discussing issues in sexual abuse and other potential criminal cases.
- Explain your role as a CASA volunteer in words children can understand. Communicate in a manner appropriate for their age and developmental level.
- Explain confidentiality. Tell children that you may be asked to share what they tell you. If they are adolescents, tell them exactly what information you will share.
- Reflect child's feelings without evaluating them and let them know it is okay to have unpleasant or negative feelings.
- Respect children's attachments to their parents. Remain neutral and non-judgmental about their parents. Do not express your opinion of the parents even if asked.
- Treat children with respect. Don't talk down to them or criticize them.
- Don't make promises you can't keep. Keep promises you make.
- Prior to confirming with children what you will advocate for, confer with the treatment team (therapist, foster parents, social workers, etc.) regarding concerns children express to you and other case matters.

#### **Working with Parents/Family Members**

- Explain your role as a court appointed special advocate in words parents and relatives can understand. Do your best to develop a good working relationship with both parents and relatives.
- Focus on obtaining information (**do not** give out information). Find the strengths of the parents and family members. Find the needs of the family. Strive to be non-judgmental.
- Tell the parents and relatives that you have been appointed by the court. Explain confidentiality: you will gather information about the case, then report facts and make recommendations to the court.
- Listen with respect.
- Respond to questions. When you do not know an answer, say so. If the question is about their legal action, encourage the parent to contact their attorney. If the question is about services encourage them to proactively contact their case manager. Confer with your coordinator to assist you if you are uncertain about the answer to a question.
- Avoid asking leading questions and making emotional remarks.
- Begin with general open-ended questions such as, "Tell me about..." Use closed questions that can be answered with "yes" or "no" or a short answer when you need specific information or when you are not receiving responses to more general questions.

- After contact with parents or family members, carefully document the facts you obtained, as well as your observations, actions, questions, and plans. Use objective statements that describe a specific fact or behavior. Do not make interpretations, diagnostic conclusions, or judgements.
- File your notes and any records you obtain in your file and in the electronic case record (Optima). Make sure you keep your coordinator up to date on information for the case.

### **Working with DFCS/collaborative partners**

- When first contacting an agency, introduce yourself as the court appointed special advocate. If seeking information, provide a copy of the Court Appointment Order.
- Receive all records in person or have them sent to the CASA office. To access records on anyone other than the child, contact your coordinator if an issue arises.
- Document all contacts and conversations in your case notes by entering the date, type of contact, agency, and individual names. Enter factorial highlights of conversations and observations.
- Maintain confidentiality.
- Consider the needs and schedule of the other party. Be Brief. State the reason you are contacting them. Present most important information first. Arrange visits in advance.
- Watch for opportunities to express your appreciation and praise and do so. Specify what was done or said, how it contributed, and why you appreciate it.
- If a disagreement arises, affirm this with the person. It is okay to disagree but still present yourself in a professional manner. Discuss any issues with your coordinator. Avoid escalating conflicts.
- Be certain that information you receive from service providers is known by the assigned case manager. Provide any significant new information as soon as possible. Discuss with case manager/team prior to court hearings.
- Contact service provider(s) to find out about the availability of needed services. If referral seems appropriate, contact the case manager and request that a referral be made. CASA's do not make referrals for services.
- Contact the assigned case manager and your coordinator when concerns exist about a child's placement.
- Ask the case manager if there are ways that CASA could help with case activities.
- Remember that patience is a virtue and persistence – appropriately expressed – is also a virtue.
- Report suspicion of child abuse/neglect to the 24-hour emergency hotline (1-855-GA CHILD)
- If you cannot reach a case manager for 72 hours (24 hours if emergency), contact your coordinator for assistance. Coordinator will contact DFCS supervisors/administration.

## **Volunteer Qualifications**

### **CASA volunteers must....**

- Be 21 years of age or older.
- Successfully pass screening requirements, which include written application, criminal record and Child Abuse Registry checks, and personal interview, and must provide 3 references.

- Successfully complete initial training provided by the CASA program. Any sessions missed must be made up by the applicant prior to swear in.
- Be able to make a 12 month minimum commitment to a case (in addition to initial training time), entailing about five hours a month at least.
- Be accepted as a volunteer by the CASA program and be sworn in by the presiding judge.
- Participate in ongoing training, a minimum of 12 hours annually.
- Accept supervision and seek feedback from the CASA staff on a regular basis.
- Be able to keep information confidential and to work within established program guidelines.
- All volunteers, once trained and sworn in, will be subject to a probationary period of six months after receiving their first case. At the end of six months, a review of their case work and in-service training will take place based on the volunteer policies and standards, the volunteer agreement, and the code of ethics. The review will be conducted by the volunteer coordinator or by the director.

### **Volunteer screening process**

- All volunteers will be screened for acceptance and assignment to the CASA program through an application and initial interview process prior to commencement of core training.
- The screening process to include training is in-depth and designed to determine if the prospective volunteer will be appropriate for CASA volunteer work.
- The screening process is designed to gather information about the prospective volunteer that will help do the following:
  - Determine the applicant's motivation and commitment to being a CASA volunteer and to the CASA program mission.
  - Determine the emotional objectivity and/or prejudice(s) of the applicant.
  - Determine the maturity, stability, and self-esteem of the applicant while watching for indicators of transference, protecting, rescuing, and fixing.
  - Determine the applicant's natural/instinctive abilities.
  - Determine how the applicant handles confrontation and his/her adaptability to new situations.
  - Determine if the applicant has any related history/background that would be either an obstacle or a benefit to his/her role as a volunteer.

## **Case Assignment**

### **Case Assignment Guidelines**

- The CASA program staff will assign a CASA volunteer to a case upon request of the court.
- A volunteer may be assigned to two cases if the CASA program feels the volunteer can handle the additional caseload and the volunteer is closely monitored. If a volunteer has more than two cases, an exception form has to be signed by the director for approval.
- After the court notifies the CASA program of a new assignment, CASA staff reviews all volunteers' files to determine which volunteers are free and best suited for the new assignment.
- CASA staff contacts the volunteer to outline the basic details of the case. The volunteer has 24 hours to consider whether or not to accept assignment to the case.

- If the volunteer accepts assignment, the court is notified and a Court Appointment Order with the name of the assigned volunteer. If the volunteer declines the assignment, another volunteer is chosen from the list.
- Volunteers always have the right to refuse a case suggested by the CASA staff.

### **Dismissal from a case**

- A Volunteer may be dismissed from a case for the following reasons:
  - At the request of the volunteer.
  - At the request of the juvenile court judge.
  - For failure to make a court appearance.
  - For failure to provide court reports and/or turn them in on time.
  - For insubordination or refusal to follow an order from court or coordinator.
  - For failure to act in a professional manner as deemed by the coordinator and/or director.
- Should the actions of a volunteer result in dismissal from either the case or the CASA program, the volunteer has the same rights as an employee to grievance procedures.
- All files, notes, and other materials associated with the CASA volunteer's case will be returned to the CASA program within 5 working days of the volunteer's dismissal.

### **Being on a leave**

- If a Volunteer has situations/events in their life that cause them not to be able to fulfill their CASA duties, the volunteer can be placed on leave. The specifics of the leave, especially the time expected to be on leave should be discussed with the assigned Advocacy Coordinator.
  - If a volunteer is on leave for over a year, the volunteer would need to complete pre-service training again before becoming active again.
  - While on leave, the CASA volunteer should still comply with obtaining their in-service hours for the year. This can also be at the discretion of the program.

## **Volunteer Administration**

### **Volunteer Supervision**

- The CASA program Advocacy Coordinator will be responsible for direct supervision of volunteers. The volunteer-to-staff ratio called for in NCASAA standards is 30 to 1.

### **Conflict of Interest**

- The CASA program shall not employ, enter into a contract with, or accept as a volunteer any individual or entity who has a conflict with the best interests of a client.
- Volunteers shall not be a DFCS employee, foster parent, employee of the court or citizen panel review volunteer, or an employee of any public agency having duties or responsibilities toward the client.



## **Resignation**

- While CASA volunteers make a commitment to continue with a case until it is terminated, there may be circumstances that require a volunteer to resign.
- Resignation must be made in writing so that the CASA program can notify all parties involved and assign another volunteer if necessary.
- It is requested that volunteers provide advance notice if at all possible and state a reason for their departure.
- At the time of a volunteer resignation all files, notes, and other case materials will be returned to the CASA program within 5 business days.

## **Disciplinary Measures**

### **Corrective Action**

- Corrective action may be taken if the volunteer's work is unsatisfactory.
- Corrective action is within discretion of the Advocacy Coordinator or Director and may include:
  - Additional supervision
  - Reassignment
  - Retraining
  - Referral to another volunteer position
  - Separation from the CASA program.

### **Separation from CASA program**

- Separation from the CASA program may occur at the discretion of the director. Appropriate grounds for the separation of a volunteer include:
  - Being charged with a crime against a child or any gross neglect or misconduct.
  - Breach of confidentiality (could have legal consequences as well)
  - Acting without program or court approval that endangers the child or is outside the capacity or power of the CASA program.
  - Violating a program policy, court order, or law.
  - Failure to satisfactorily complete initial training.
  - Failure to complete required ongoing training.
  - Falsifying information on volunteer application or misrepresenting facts during the screening process.
  - References are not consistent with application or screening process.
  - Becoming inappropriately involved or over involved with the child or family.
  - Violation of the program's non-discrimination and/or sexual harassment policy.
  - Demonstrating an inability to effectively carry out CASA volunteer duties.
  - Neglect of duty or incompetence.
  - Soliciting or accepting gratuities.
  - Failure to contact child on a monthly basis without legitimate reason.
  - No contact with CASA program staff for two months, including no reports to the office, no replies to communication from CASA program staff.
  - Repeated failure to do reports to the court or monthly reports to the program office.

- Not serving in the child's best interest.

### Conflict Resolution

- If a volunteer disagrees with any action, including correction or separation, taken by the CASA program or any of its agents, he/she must first meet with the CASA director and attempt to resolve any disagreement.
- If the disagreement is not resolved to the satisfaction of the volunteer, the volunteer may file a written complaint with the board of directors.
- The board of directors or governing body may uphold or reverse the decision of the CASA director. No further appeal or review is allowed.

### General Policies

- Ultimate responsibility for all CASA volunteer cases rests with the CASA program director. As a volunteer, you represent the CASA program and what you do reflects on the organization. Always conduct yourself in a professional way that reflects favorably on the CASA program and comply with the program's policies and procedures.
- **Open Door:** The CASA program has an open door policy. If you have any problems or questions regarding your case or concerning policies outlined in this manual, you are encouraged to discuss them with your coordinator.
- **Agency Letterhead:** Volunteers act as official representatives of the CASA program and may use program letterhead in normal advocacy situations. Use of letterhead is not permissible for personal correspondence relating to the CASA program (e.g., letters to the editor expressing personal opinions, etc.).
- **Media Communication:** Volunteers are not permitted to make statements involving the CASA program to the media without the written consent of the program director. Any inquiries concerning the CASA program and its policies, practices, or clients should be referred to the program director. Volunteers may be asked by the program director to represent the program at speaking engagements.
- **Social Media Policy:** When representing CASA in a social media setting, do not express personal opinions that reflect negatively against CASA or our community partners. As a volunteer, refrain from becoming friends with clients on cases on social media outlets.
- **Conference/Workshop Attendance:** will be offered to volunteers as opportunities arise and funding is available.
- **Direct-Service Provision:** The CASA program is not a direct-service provider. The program is a facilitator and may advocate for direct-service providers to provide appropriate services to clients.
- **Person Involvement with Children and Families:** CASA volunteers' effectiveness and standing in court depends on volunteers maintaining professional relationships with children and families. Volunteers are not permitted to become involved with children and families. Inappropriate personal involvement with a client can be grounds for dismissal.