



## COURT APPOINTED SPECIAL ADVOCATE/GUARDIAN AD LITEM FACT SHEET

### What is a CASA/GAL?

A Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)/Guardian ad Litem (GAL) is appointed by a judge to represent the best interests of an abused or neglected child in court.

### What is the role of the CASA/GAL?

A CASA provides a judge with a carefully researched background of the child to help the court make sound decisions about the child's future. Each case is as unique as the child or children involved. The CASA must determine if it is in a child's best interest to stay with his or her parents or guardians, be placed in foster or relative care, or be freed for permanent adoption. The CASA makes a recommendation on placement and services to the judge and continues on the case until the child is placed in a safe, permanent home.

In fulfilling this child-centered role, the CASA performs four separate functions:

- 1) An **INVESTIGATOR** whose task is to ferret out all relevant facts and report them to the court;
- 2) An **ADVOCATE** for the best interest of the child in the courtroom and in the child welfare and social services systems;
- 3) A **MONITOR** who ensures that court orders are being followed and all services are provided in a timely manner and who brings to the court's attention any new developments, changes, or concerns; and
- 4) A **FACILITATOR** who identifies resources and services for the child and facilitates collaborative relationships among all parties involved in the case, helping to create a situation in which the child's needs can best be met.

### How does a CASA investigate a case?

To prepare a recommendation, the CASA talks with the child, parents, family members, case workers, school personnel, health providers, and others who are knowledgeable about the child's history.

### **How does a CASA differ from a Children Service's caseworker?**

Case workers may work on as many as 10 to 12 cases at a time, which can limit the amount of time available for a comprehensive investigation of each. The CASA is a volunteer who handles only one or two cases at a time. As an independent appointee of the court and a party to the case, the CASA thoroughly examines a child's case, has knowledge of community resources, and is required to make recommendations to the court based on the best interests of the child. Unlike the caseworker, who has a legal mandate to try to reunify families, the CASA's mandate is to advocate for the best interests of the child. A trained CASA/GAL and a skilled caseworker are both critical to a successful case.

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

The CASA does not provide legal representation; that is the role of the attorney. Instead, the CASA volunteer advocates for the best interests of the child. The CASA provides crucial background information and logical, fact-based recommendations that assist the court in making sound decisions for the child.

### **Is there a "typical" CASA?**

CASAs come from all walks of life, with a variety of professional, educational, and ethnic backgrounds. Diversity is valued and provides a foundation of strength to our program. The Lucas County CASA program is composed of both male and female volunteers over 21 years of age who may be employed full-time or part-time, be retired, be a volunteer attorney, or be a homemaker.

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

CASAs are ordinary citizens, twenty-one years of age or older. No special or legal background is required. However, volunteers are screened closely for objectivity, competence, and commitment.

### **How many cases on the average does a CASA carry at a time?**

The number varies, but usually each CASA carries one or two cases at a time. The National CASA Association suggests volunteers carry no more than two cases at any given time. CASA volunteers are not assigned but are asked to take a case. CASA volunteers always have the right to turn down a case request.

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

Two different types of interactive training are offered, CASA/GAL trainees undergo a thorough one-time, 40 or 30 hour training. Typically the 40-hour training is scheduled over a four-week period and is a combination of Friday and Saturday day-long plus early evening seminars. The 30-hour training includes self-guided learning over the internet and an evening class each week for six weeks. Volunteers learn about courtroom procedure from the principals in the system: judges, lawyers, service providers, caseworkers, court personnel and others. CASA trainees also learn effective advocacy techniques and are educated about specific topics ranging from child sexual abuse to early childhood development and adolescent behavior. Cultural awareness and sensitivity are also part of the training curriculum. The culmination of the initial training is the swearing-in ceremony with the Juvenile Court Judges where CASA/GAL volunteers become sworn officers of the Court.

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

The CASA interviews the child he/she represents, if the child is old enough to talk. If not, the CASA observes the child's interactions with the various people involved in the child's life. The CASA offers the child a trust-based relationship and advocacy, both within and outside the courtroom, during complex legal proceedings. The CASA explains to the child the events that are happening and the roles the judge, lawyers, case workers and others play. The CASA also encourages the child to express his or her own opinions, fears, and hopes and conveys those to the court. In addition, the VOICES initiative invites children ages 10 and older to participate in court hearings affecting them.

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

Each case is different. A CASA volunteer usually spends about 20-30 hours doing research, conducting interviews, and writing a court report during the first 4-6 weeks of a new case. Once a CASA writes his/her initial report and appears at the first hearing, he/she can expect to spend about 1-2 hours per week on a case.

### **How long does a CASA remain with a case?**

The CASA continues on the case until the case is permanently resolved. Each volunteer is asked to make an initial two-year commitment to the program. One of the primary benefits of the CASA program is that, unlike other case principals who often rotate cases, the volunteer is a consistent figure in the court proceedings and the child's life, providing much needed continuity for the system and, more importantly, for the 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 in which volunteers are appointed as officers of the court by the judge to represent a child's best interest.

### **What children are assigned a CASA?**

Children who are victims of abuse or neglect and for whom cases have been filed in the Juvenile Court are assigned a CASA/GAL.

### **How did the CASA program get started?**

In 1979 Juvenile Judge Andy Devine heard a presentation by Carmen Ray, who was the Director of the CASA program in Seattle, Washington, the nation's first program. Judge Devine asked the Junior League of Toledo, Inc. to investigate the possibility of establishing a program in Lucas County. After four months of research, the Junior League began the CASA program with the first training in November 1980. There were 20 volunteers in the first class. Since that time, the Lucas County Juvenile Court CASA/GAL program has continuously served our community.

### **How does the CASA program operate now?**

The CASA program is a department of the Lucas County Juvenile Court. As such, it is funded by the LCJC budget, the Lucas County commissioners and ultimately, your tax dollars. There is also

a CASA/Citizen Review Board Volunteer Association that has a tax-exempt status to enable the program to accept grants and donations to enhance volunteer efforts. The Lucas County CASA department and its volunteers are directed by Judy Leb and a staff of twelve.

### **How many CASA programs are there?**

There are CASA programs in 49 states and the District of Columbia. Nationwide approximately 87,000 citizens serve as CASA volunteers in nearly 1,000 programs. Every year approximately, 280,000 abused and neglected children are served by CASA volunteers.

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

- Children with a CASA volunteer are half as likely to spend time in long-term foster care, defined as more than three years in care.
- Cases involving a CASA volunteer are more likely to be permanently closed. Fewer than 10% of children with a CASA volunteer reenter the foster care system.
- CASA volunteers spend most of their volunteer time in contact with a child. They generally handle just one or two cases at a time so that they can give each child the sustained, personal attention he or she deserves. To a child, that means a consistent and caring adult presence in his or her life.
- CASA advocacy saves taxpayer dollars.

*(Source: Caliber Association, NCA Evaluation Project, Fairfax, VA 2004)*

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

Yes. Juvenile and family court judges implement the CASA program in their courtrooms and appoint the 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. CASA is a major project of Kappa Alpha Theta Sorority and Kiwanis.

### **Does the federal government support CASA?**

Yes. CASA is a priority project of the Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the State of Ohio Attorney General's Office. These offices encourage the establishment of new CASA programs, assist established CASA programs, and provide partial funding for the National CASA Association, of which Lucas County CASA is an accredited member.

### **What is the role of the National CASA Association?**

The National CASA Association is a non-profit organization that represents and serves local CASA programs. It provides training, technical assistance, research, legislative awareness, news and public awareness services to members. The National CASA Association is located in Seattle, Washington, and is funded through a combination of private grants, federal funds, memberships, and contributions.