

Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)/Prince George’s County, Inc.

When a child is so severely abused—left with bruises and broken bones after wetting the bed; neglected—left home alone for days to care for younger siblings; or molested—abused by a person she should be able to trust, the County removes the child from their family. They are then thrust into the foster care system: sent to live with strangers and suddenly expected to trust unfamiliar lawyers, social workers and therapists. That’s where CASA comes in.

CASA trains ordinary citizens to help these young people navigate this confusing and sometimes scary system. These highly trained volunteer advocates work one-on-one with children, getting to know them, talking to the important people in their lives, working to understand them, not just their legal case. These volunteer advocates then go to Court with them, not only to hold their hand but to advocate for them. They provide written and oral reports to the Court that protect children’s fundamental rights to live in safety. Volunteer advocates provide stability and certainty at a chaotic time.

“The CASA Volunteer’s focus is what is best for the youth... The only complaint that has persisted is that there are not enough volunteers.” - The Honorable Judge Larnzell Martin

With a staff of thirteen professionals, we work every day to ensure only the most qualified volunteers are selected to serve. After an intensive background screening, we train individuals for 30 hours before they can accept their first case. Once they do, they are matched with a Case Supervisor who works closely with them to monitor progress, connect volunteers to community resources- therapists, workforce development programs, tutors, substance abuse treatment for parents; and ensure that we are doing everything possible for that child.

The CASA model works. Children matched with a volunteer advocate spend less time in foster care, do better in school, are less likely to bounce from foster home to foster home, are more likely to be connected to a stable caring adult and are more likely to find a safe, permanent home. 85% of the cases we close result in a permanent placement.

CASA never gives up. No matter whether the young person is AWOL or non-compliant or whether the case is extraordinarily complex, CASA is always consistent. The children we work with have someone they can count on who regularly looks out for their best interests. Our work is very

“This [my CASA] is the only person in the room not being paid to care, so when he speaks, you need to listen.”- CASA youth during Family Involvement Meeting

customized. No one model works for each child. It takes time, research, attention to equity, and care to craft a permanency plan- a path out of foster care, for each child and implement it.

CASA serves about 200 abused and neglected children each year, which is about 40% of the children who are in foster care in Prince George’s County. **Our work breaks the cycle of generational abuse and poverty through the stability we create for our County’s young people.** We achieve that stability by creating permanent placements and connections to caring adults, in conjunction with support culturally competent services like therapy, visitation, medical treatment and parenting classes that we garner for youth and families.

As we celebrate our 20th anniversary this year, we are in our strongest financial position ever and are providing the strongest results ever to the children we serve:

- 85% of the cases we close result in a permanent placement.
- An overwhelming majority of the services that volunteer advocates recommend are ordered by the Court, resulting in more services for children served by CASA.
- Of the young people we serve who emancipate at 21 (i.e., grow up in foster care without a permanent placement until they “age out”) who have a CASA volunteer, 100% are stably housed whereas national estimates of stable housing for newly emancipated foster youth are as low as 14%.
- *Less than 1%* of the children with CASA volunteers in Prince George’s County reenter the child welfare system, compared to 12-25% of the general foster care population.

“The Department of Social Services had been sending mom all this information that she didn’t respond to and they would report to the Court that she wasn’t following orders. The CASA volunteer uncovered the fact that mom was illiterate and was too embarrassed to say. The child had been in foster care for a year.” - CASA Case Supervisor on CASA’s ability to uncover and address critical issues

Nationwide, children with CASA volunteers spend 7.5 months less in foster care, experience fewer out of home placements and show significantly better educational performance than non-CASA peers.

75% of kids in foster care are not placed with their siblings. In many cases, kids would not get to visit with their siblings if it were not for their CASA volunteer driving them, sometimes hours, to see them.

We once met a young man in Court who had seen a case prior to his where a CASA was involved. During his hearing the young man said to the Judge, “I don’t know who that person was, but I want one of them [a CASA volunteer advocate].”

The Children Are Waiting

With all of the accomplishments we celebrate, we look to the children we cannot serve. **300 Prince George’s County children are being bounced through the foster care system without someone to help**

guide them.

Recognizing the benefit of CASA, the local Court decided that more children need CASA volunteers and now refer nearly every new case to us. Approximately 300 children do not have a CASA volunteer due to a lack of capacity.

The Solution

We are committed to matching every child in need with a volunteer advocate in the next four years. As one person, that can seem like an overwhelming number. But together it's not.

CASA will increase our capacity by 60% in order to serve every abused and neglected child in foster care in Prince George's County who needs a CASA. Children will be matched with a CASA who is able to work with them one-on-one in order to understand and respond to their unique needs. CASA will have focused tracks of volunteer training and supervision around Family Advocacy for children for whom reunification is a realistic goal and our Transitioning Youth Program will focus on preparing older youth for independence when their case closes. CASA will continue to address specific needs of subsets of this population including those who are at-risk/victims of human trafficking and domestic violence, LGBTQ youth, youth for whom language or immigration is a barrier and other emerging needs. CASA will continue to be a constant in the lives of children who stay in foster care long-term but will also seek permanency in every case.

The Administrative Office of the Court has determined that CASA is most effective when assigned at the first hearing. By reaching capacity, we will be able to assign volunteer advocates as soon as the case begins to provide maximum impact.

We expect the following impact by 2025:

- All children and youth in foster care who can benefit from a CASA volunteer will be matched with an advocate
- 85% of cases will close to permanency (successful closure with reunification, adoption, guardianship or emancipating successfully)
- 100% of emancipating youth, aged 21, with a CASA will be stably housed
- 80% of emancipating youth will have a job or education leading to a job

What It Will Take

Your investment in CASA fuels the recruitment, training and support of volunteer advocates, enabling us to reach our goal to serve every child in foster care. Best practices dictate that each volunteer works with one child or family. Our Case Supervisors oversee a maximum of 30

volunteers. Our intensive, customized model dictates that, to grow the number of children served, we must grow the ranks of our Case Supervisors.

In order to accommodate the level of need as expressed by the Prince George’s County Juvenile Court, CASA has been working for the past three years to build our internal capacity and we see a clear path to how we can reach our optimal size. CASA will go from serving approximately 200 children served each year to serve the all children in need of a CASA. To do this, we will need to have 11 full-time Case Supervisors on staff and will need to recruit approximately 150 volunteers per year and increase our management and fundraising staffing. Our current budget is approximately \$1,000,000. In order to reach our goal, CASA will need to reach and maintain a budget of approximately \$1,350,000 per year.

When asked what life would have been like without a CASA, a former foster youth said,
“Oh my God, it would have been totally different...without CASA... I want to break down crying just thinking about it.”

General operating costs will increase due to volume of staff such as insurance, professional development, and travel costs; and costs associated with training and screening volunteers would increase. CASA will need to enhance its volunteer recruitment techniques and add some paid advertising. CASA currently does not have a budget for fundraising but would need to commit some funds to those endeavors in order to build our individual and corporate donations. CASA would continue to seek in-kind donations to offset costs of volunteer recruitment and training. The in-kind service provided by our volunteers will bring an additional \$1,380,000 in value to our organization.

Children awaiting a CASA have experienced the trauma of abuse and neglect combined with further trauma of being in “the system.” They should not have to wait to have a consistent voice in their life, speaking up for their best interest.

The Investment

CASA currently sees stronger results in permanency, education, employment, relationships, and needs being met. But we do so for only 40% of the kids who need it. In the next four years, we can be making a difference in the lives of every child in foster care who needs a CASA. CASA is the only organization doing this type of work. There are many service providers – mentors, tutors, therapists – who are available to help foster youth. And they are great partners. However, the trauma these children have experienced cannot be erased by a single service provider. CASA is the only organization that looks at the whole picture and can bring together the network of individuals and resources that can help turn around a child’s life.

Together we can break cycles of generational poverty and abuse. Together we can provide the light of hope in the life of a child.

CASA's staff is led by a 20-year veteran Executive Director who is not only a tireless advocate but has effectively guided the organization through the economic collapse, changes in administration and policy and has built an organization that is respected as a child welfare leader in the community. She was named a 2020 "Champion for Children" by the Child Welfare League of America. Our Board brings a broad range of experience and is deeply committed to our mission. Our staff bring a range of legal and social service skills to their empathetic and persistent partnerships with the volunteers they supervise. Volunteers are the backbone of CASA and often provide the first example of stability the children experience.

Foster care continues to remain hidden. The costs alone are exorbitant: Maintaining a child in foster care costs taxpayers nearly \$30,000 per year when a child is placed in a traditional foster home. Those costs skyrocket when a child is placed in specialized foster homes or facilities for youth with severe emotional or behavioral issues. After the first year in foster care, a child's likelihood of exiting the system drops from 28% to 16% and continues to decrease each year. The average child in Prince George's County spends four years in foster care which totals over \$120,000 per child, or \$15,000,000 for all children in care. More troubling still are the 34% of Prince George's County kids who simply "age out." As the Child Welfare League of America explains, youth transitioning out of foster care are "at a higher risk for unemployment, poor educational outcomes, health issues, early parenthood, long-term dependency on public assistance, increased rates of incarceration, and homelessness" which all cause increases in taxpayer funded programs.

"No one else does what you do"-
Pupil Personnel Worker, to CASA

Yet the greatest cost is the one inflicted upon the children in our midst. The public often does not realize the extent or severity of abuse and neglect. While extreme stories sometimes surface in the media, public interest quickly fades. And people falsely assume that once children are in foster care they are "taken care of," even though there may well be ongoing trauma and even mistreatment.

When CASA is involved, very real issues get uncovered and addressed. CASA volunteers work hard to establish trust with the youth and very often become the one person in their lives whom they can trust, whom they know will be there for them even if they change schools or foster homes or social workers ... again. **Together we can reverse a terrible trend and ensure that these vulnerable youth, who have grown up feeling that no one cares, have someone who will speak up for them and that they will finally find a home they can call their own.**