



Diligence Trip Report

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA)

Los Angeles and Chicago - Spring 2014

CASA of Los Angeles

Focusing Philanthropy began evaluating the National CASA organization in the fall of 2013 as part of a broader attempt at understanding the challenges and shortcomings of the foster care system, and where Focusing Philanthropy could have a distinct and targeted impact. On March 27, 2014 three Focusing Philanthropy team members visited the CASA program of Los Angeles. They met with several key staff including the Executive Director and the Presiding Judge of the Juvenile Court at Los Angeles Superior Court.

There are currently 28,000 children in the dependency court system in Los Angeles County, the largest number of any county in the country. In 2013, CASA of Los Angeles was able to serve 748 of these foster youth with intensive advocacy, and provided over 5,600 children “day-of-court” assistance.

Historically, CASA of Los Angeles has served 500-600 foster youth per year. However, a restructuring of the organization from government-sponsored to an independent nonprofit during the last four years has positioned CASA of Los Angeles to serve 1,000 foster youth with intensive advocacy services in 2014. The organization plans to grow that number in the coming years by 150 foster youth per year. The program hired 2/3 of its current staff within the last 4 years, and 95% of its annual budget comes from private philanthropy – whereas prior to their restructuring the budget was almost entirely supported by public monies.

The Focusing Philanthropy team also observed court hearings to gain a firsthand understanding of the environment in which CASA volunteers, judges, social workers, attorneys, parents, and foster youth interact. Children’s attorneys and assigned social workers easily carry more than double the recommended caseloads, and subsequently are unable to vouch thoroughly for the interests of the child. CASA volunteers fill this crucial gap. The Presiding Judge commented that there is a long waiting list for CASAs being requested by judicial officers.

CASA of Cook County

On April 23, 2014 one Focusing Philanthropy team member visited the CASA program of Cook County, which includes the city of Chicago. The team member met with several key staff including the Executive Director, volunteer coordinator, and office manager at the Cook County Juvenile Court. Established 115 years ago, this is the oldest juvenile court in the county.

CASA of Cook County was founded in 1986 as the first CASA program in the state of Illinois. Like CASA of Los Angeles, CASA of Cook County was first established as a government-sponsored program and has since become an independent nonprofit. For CASA of Cook County, this transition occurred in 2001.

Like CASA of Los Angeles, CASA of Cook County’s office is located within the county courthouse in which cases regarding foster children are held. CASA staff in each location mentioned how advantageous it is to have a space within the courthouse. The location makes it possible for staff members to respond quickly to requests from judges to attend a hearing and provides critical program visibility and further weight to the role and perception of CASA volunteers. Not all regional CASA programs have official space within a courthouse. In Chicago, this space is provided by the county at nearly no cost to the program.

There are currently 5,600 – 6,000 children in the dependency court system in Cook County each year. CASA of Cook County can currently serve approximately 10% of these youth each year. At the time of the site visit, CASA of Cook County was working with 475 foster youth. The ages of these youth range from 0 - 21 or 23 years, depending on when they age-out and if they are enrolled in higher education.

CASA of Cook County leverages the time of approximately 300 volunteers annually, including about 75-80 who are newly trained each year. Training classes for new volunteers often fill to capacity months in advance. A professional advocacy staff of 7 supports these volunteers. Nationally, the ratio of advocacy staff to CASA volunteers must be no more than 1:30. In total, CASA of Cook County is led by a staff of 10 with an annual budget of approximately \$500,000.

Volunteers must commit to at least 1 year of service. The average commitment in Cook County is 2.8 years. Individual case lengths range from 4 months to 5 years. These volunteers interact frequently and consistently with their assigned youth, something the county social workers often cannot do. Caseloads for local county social workers can be as high as 70 youth. CASA volunteers visit with their youth at least once per month. Because of the high demand for their time, county social workers can go 3 or 4 months between in-person visits with their assigned youth.

The Executive Director explained that CASA volunteers are best described as investigators. They provide the due diligence required to determine the best possible outcomes and futures for their youth. In short, the Executive Director explained that they work to ensure that none of their youth end-up in the criminal court or detention center located across the street from the juvenile courthouse.

The CASA staff is thoughtful in assigning cases and volunteers. They take into account the language needs and abilities of the youth and volunteers, with Spanish and American Sign Language being most common, after English. The complexity of the case is also considered, typically assigning more challenging cases to veteran volunteers.

To address the diverse needs of local foster children, CASA of Cook County coordinates two specialized programs: Medically At Risk Kids (MARK) program and the Creating Independent Transitions for Youth (CITY) initiative. Under the supervision of the MARK Coordinator, CASA volunteers serve as advocates for medically fragile children to ensure that each child receives the appropriate medical care and to minimize the potential for abuse, or re-abuse. The CITY initiative assists older youth who are preparing to transition out of the foster care system. Specially trained CITY Advocates work one-on-one with youth age 16 - 23 to address safe housing and financial needs, education and career planning, and essential life skills.

CASA of Cook County does not have formal access to youth records once a case is closed, making long-term evaluation a challenge. One important metric they track and evaluate regularly is the rate at which judges agree and rule with the recommendations of the CASA volunteer. Locally, judges enter orders consistent with the volunteer's recommendation in 93-94% of cases.

Reaching 10% of local foster children annually, CASA of Cook County is clearly a well-established CASA program impacting the lives and futures of hundreds of youth every year. As was shared, the most significant limitation in expanding to serve more Cook County foster youth is the development of additional funding sources. There is no lack of children in need, nor volunteers eager to help. As the Executive Director explained, their greatest challenge is building support for a program that's largely invisible to those outside the system or courtroom.