



CASA LA Program Visited

- Los Angeles County Edelman Courthouse

CASA LA Staff & Participants

- Wende Nichols-Julien, CEO
- Kristen McGuiness, Director of Institutional Giving
- Lynne Gabriel, Director of Training & Volunteer Relations
- Don, CASA Volunteer

Focusing Philanthropy Board

- Dewey Corley
- Keith Ennis
- Elliott Gilson
- Larry Gilson
- John Weissenbach

Focusing Philanthropy Staff

- Teresa Burton

Executive Summary

On October 22, 2019, the Focusing Philanthropy Board visited the LA County Edelman Courthouse to visit the CASA LA program. The Board observed proceedings in two courtrooms and met with Executive Director, Wendy Julien, CASA volunteer, Don, and other members of the CASA staff.

Background

The Courthouse

Wendy Julien welcomed the Board and gave a quick overview of how the courthouse functions on a typical day. The CASA offices are located on the first floor, just beyond security. Nearby is a daycare for children whose cases are being heard. Because cases are not assigned a time-certain, children must sometimes wait all day for their case to be called. Parents also have to be present starting at 9am and may have to wait all day until their case is heard.

There are approximately 30,000 foster care cases in LA County. Twenty-seven courtrooms are located at the Edelman courthouse and another three courtrooms at the Lancaster courthouse. Each Dependency Court Judge has responsibility for about 1,100 cases and hears 50 to 60 cases daily for about 10 minutes each. Social workers have between 20-30 cases and are never present in court. Instead, social workers send a report to the Judge on each case and a social worker liaison and an attorney for DCFS are present. Children are represented by attorneys from the Children's Law Center who have between 200 and 300 cases each. Parents are represented by attorneys from the Dependency Court who have a similar number of cases.

On any given day, it is rare to see a case with a CASA because there are many more cases than CASA's. When a CASA is appointed to a case, they are present at all court hearings and their recommendations are typically more powerful than the social worker and the child's attorney. Having full access to the families, foster parents, teachers, doctors, and others on a case makes their neutral, yet child-focused, assessments and recommendations very meaningful to the Judge because they provide the humanity that the system lacks.

Courtroom Observations

The group separated into two groups of three people to observe court proceedings. One group observed a trial on the subject of returning 3 children to their mother. The second group observed two hearings, both status updates.

Institutional & Program Takeaways

- FP Board members observed one hearing about the status of a request for a new wheelchair for a young child that was over 10 months overdue. The discussion of the case revealed a few important problems with the DCFS bureaucracy: passing the buck, failure to read reports, failure to process requests, bureaucratic logjams, and inaction due to disputes over which agency should pay for medical equipment.
 - This is a case where a CASA would be very effective in resolving the issue in a timely way. Unfortunately, CASA does not have enough volunteers to serve on every case. Currently Judges, appoint CASA's to only the most complex and difficult cases.
- When asked why foster children experience so many placements, Wendy explained that trauma is a theme in many foster care cases. Children who are affected by trauma often suffer from behavioral problems such as outbursts, bed-wetting, aggressive conduct, depression and suicidal behavior. She says foster parents need more support and training to care for impacted children to keep them from being routinely passed from one placement to another. CASA has been training and advocating for specialized services for children affected by trauma for many years. In the newest state budget, there are funds for the foster parent hotline to help deal with difficult situations in real time.
 - According to CASA's recent data, children with CASA's experience only 1.7 placements per year as compared to 4 placements per year for the average foster child. The reason is CASA's are able to get involved and diffuse some situations by counseling the child and intervening on their behalf to ask the foster parent to give them another chance.

Discussion with CASA Volunteer

Don, a retired businessman, is working on his fourth case as a CASA volunteer. He briefly described the successes and failures in each of his cases to our group. In his first case, Don helped reunite a child with his mother. Then, he worked with a 19-year-old who had spent his whole life in foster care and eventually opted to leave care and later became homeless. His third case involved a severely abused 7-year-old with incontinence and behavior problems who had been in 6 placements in 2 years. Despite his difficulties, Don says he was a lovable kid who just needed someone to properly care for him. Don was able to find him a permanent, adoptive home. In his current three-year long case, Don is working with a troubled child who refuses to go to school and has no other adults in his life.

Don described being a CASA as the most rewarding experience of his life. He was recommended to CASA by his daughter who thought it would be something interesting for him to do in retirement. Don has no previous teaching or counseling experience and is among very few male volunteers, but he says the work is very manageable. One of the personal benefits he noted was exposure to a different world of people struggling to survive the effects of poverty, drug abuse, systemic racism and trauma. He feels that his life is richer for helping people who are trying to cope with and overcome these considerable obstacles. According to Don, the foster care system is full of well-meaning people who are overwhelmed by the complexities of the problems. He typically spends 10 to 15 hours per month and says that time greatly enriches his life.

CASA Stats

- This year CASA will serve about 1,500 children. Another 340 children remain on the waiting list.
- In LA, there are 267,000 calls to the DCFS hotline. Of those, 84,000 are referred to law enforcement who refer the case to DCFS for investigation. After an investigation, DCFS has four options: leave the child at home, remove the child and send to live with relatives, or send the child to foster care. If a child is removed from home, the court has 72 hours to hold a hearing to uphold the removal.

CASA Growth Strategy



- CASA LA is launching a multiyear effort to serve up to 12,000 kids. The number is a result of the analysis that out of 30,000 children, 9,000 are with their parents, 11,000 are in the care of relatives, 10,000 are in foster homes with 1,100 of those in group homes, probation halls and camps. CASA estimates that the 10,000 children in foster care plus another 2,000 with medical, educational or other difficulties are the highest priority cases that need CASA's.
- Currently, CASA LA needs to recruit more volunteers both to replace those leaving and to serve more kids. A recent grant has doubled the amount of print and radio ads. Additional funding has also supported more webinars and in-person information sessions.
- Once CASA recruits more volunteers, the need will shift to additional fundraising in order to hire more Advocacy Supervisors to oversee the new volunteers.
- When asked about the biggest obstacles to recruiting more volunteers, Wendy explained that there are stigmas about foster children that CASA needs to be creative about overcoming in order to appeal to a wider audience. For example, there is a stigma that foster children are difficult when in truth they are just kids who need stable adults in their lives.
- Wendy noted that recent efforts have resulted in a cultural shift in the perceptions of another group of children. For many years sexually exploited children were called "child prostitutes" instead of "victims of trafficking." Now we understand their situation better and call them trafficked children. If CASA can begin to change perceptions and appeal to more adults' moral sense of obligation, CASA can help many more children avoid the terrible outcomes of homelessness and prison.

FP Relationship

- Wendy related to the group that she is proud of the strong relationship CASA LA and FP have built. She says FP has persistently urged CASA LA to think strategically about how to serve more children. Those discussions have led her to develop the recent growth plan.
- The FP Board had several ideas for how to help CASA. See document entitled, Marketing and Recruiting Strategies for CASA LA.