



CASA Los Angeles Diligence Trip Report March 26, 2018

CASA LA Program Visited

- Edelman Courthouse

Focusing Philanthropy Staff

- Parnia Banki
- Beatriz Moreno

CASA LA Staff & Participants

- Wende Nichols-Julien, Executive Director
- Kristen McGuiness, Corporate & Foundations Relations Manager
- Judge Marguerite D. Downing, Superior Court Judge
- Sam, CASA Volunteer (2018 National CASA Volunteer of the Year)

Executive Summary

Parnia Banki and Beatriz Moreno of Focusing Philanthropy, along with staff members from the Dodger Foundation, visited the CASA LA program in LA County Dependency Court at the Edelman Courthouse on March 26, 2018. The purpose of the visit was to see the courthouse, observe a dependency proceeding, see the CASA LA offices, observe regular daily courthouse activities, and participate in discussions with CASA staff, dependency court judges, and CASA volunteers. Unfortunately, the judge who permits observers in her courtroom was not in session so the group was unable to watch a court proceeding. Despite that, the conversations with the CASA volunteer Sam Herrod, and Judge Downing were informative and inspiring.

Background

The courthouse

- The bottom floor at the courthouse is used for shelter care which is similar to a daycare for foster youth while they are at the courthouse
- There are 28 dependency judges in LA county – of which 3 are commissioners; being assigned to the dependency court system is a first time assignment for judicial officers, but very few stay resulting in high turnover rates
- Each judge has a docket of ~1,000 foster youth cases
- Social workers have ~25 cases . Given their heavy case load, they are almost never in court when the child's case is being heard.
- Hearings are ~10 min.
- 28 court rooms at the Edelman Courthouse
- Each judge hears about 30 to 35 cases/day

Institutional & Program takeaways

- CASA LA has ~800 volunteers and will serve ~1,100 in FY 2018
- CASA Los Angeles does not need to invest in its volunteer outreach, recruitment, and training teams in the coming years, but will need to continue investing in Advocacy Supervisors. They are recruiting 300 – 350 new volunteers each year, and they lose between 100 – 150... so they need to accommodate about 200-250 new volunteers each year. ***This equates to ~5 new Supervisors per year, ~\$375,000 in incremental***

funding per year to add these people (\$1,500/CASA). Focusing Philanthropy should monitor this, as a potential giving opportunity moving forward.

- CASA volunteer is approved to speak with all stakeholders involved in a foster youth's case – the child, the attorneys of the parents and the child; the social worker; the judge; the foster parents, and if granted educational rights, with school officials
- There is a hierarchy of needs that CASA's must prioritize: Safety and permanence are the first priorities, once those have been stabilized, educational needs are addressed. CASA operates based on the Maslow Pyramid of needs.
- Foster children say they trust CASA's because they are not paid (vs. all other parties involved) and serve voluntarily, with the single motivation of advocating for and "just being there" for the kids. This gives CASA's credibility which helps them be more effective in their role - they can ask more of the kids when it comes to staying in a placement, cooperating with foster parents, or staying in school
- CASA's are neutral parties, yet they are advocating for the child. They have a holistic view, and can negotiate with the various parties, whereas the attorneys are focused and only advocating for their client.
- CASA's provide the humanity that the system/judges often lack.
- Children dependency court was funded by gov't until 2011. Now it's primarily supported by foundations donors and with only nominal government funding.

Stats:

- 34,000 cases with DCFS; 30,000 youth in foster care; 20,000 of these youth are in out-of-home care
- In LA County only 20%-25% of foster youth graduate from high school
- ~65% of trafficked girls in foster care are African American
- Diversity of CASA volunteer recruits is an issue: Only 10% of CASAs are African American; only 20% of CASA's are males, whereas half of the youth served by CASA LA are males and 42% are African American).
 - CASA LA is doing about 1 recruitment event/month in South Los Angeles. Will launch partnership with LA AME church in Fall 2018
- CASA LA is currently serving ~ 100 youth in the 18-21 extended foster care- many of whom are already parents
- Most kids in foster care face difficulties in school. 75% of CASA's work on educational advocacy

Key Observations

CASA Volunteer, Sam description of his experience as a long-time advocate was both moving and instructive for our group. He explained how holding the educational rights of his foster child allowed him to help his student choose the best high school for his needs and secure services that would help him succeed in school and in life.

Judge Downing's presentation revealed three important benefits of the CASA program. First, the overwhelming size of each Judge's case loads affords them very little time to focus on the specific needs of each child. Second, judges appreciate the contributions CASA's make in the form of time spent with kids and written reports with details on each case. Most importantly, judges trust that CASA volunteers' recommendations are in the child's best interest and they rely on them when making decisions.

