



## Voices for Children San Diego Diligence Trip Report January 15, 2020

### Program Visited

- San Diego Voices for Children (VFC) Office Headquarters & San Diego County Juvenile Court

### VFC SD Staff & Participants

- Kelly Douglas, Executive Director & CEO since October 2019
- Stephen Moore, Sr. VP Programs for over 10 years
- Jessica Miller, Advocacy Supervisor Juvenile Justice
- Giselle Acosta, Advocacy Supervisor Juvenile Justice
- Judge Kimberlee Lagotta, Presiding Judge SD Juvenile Court

### Focusing Philanthropy Staff

- Teresa Cisneros Burton

### Background

Voices for Children San Diego was founded in 1980 to recruit, train, and support Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteers who speak up for the needs and well-being of children in foster care. As the only agency designated by the courts to provide CASA volunteers in San Diego and Riverside Counties, Voices for Children's CASAs play a crucial role in helping judges make the most informed decisions in dependency and juvenile court cases.

### Purpose of the visit

- Meet the new ED/CEO, Kelly Douglas in person
- Learn about her vision and plans for VFC
- Observe proceedings in a Dual Court – a Juvenile and Dependency Delinquency Courtroom

### Highlights

- Kelly Douglas was hired by the Board last summer and officially started work in October 2019. Douglas has spent the last 26 years working in law and higher education. She served as the General Counsel of the University of San Diego since 2005, where she led the university's legal department and was the chief legal advisor to the board of trustees. Before joining USD, she was a partner at Luce Forward Hamilton & Scripps LLP. Douglas received a law degree from Duke University and a bachelor's degree in international relations from Stanford University. She serves as vice chair of the Goodwill Industries of San Diego board of directors and is active in various leadership roles with the National Association of College and University Attorneys.
- VFC is currently expanding outreach for CASA volunteer recruitment. November and December 2019 stats show more kids were removed from their homes which caused an increase in the number of children on the CASA waitlist. The waitlist is currently 131 children with a 45-day wait, down from 59 days.
- In January in San Diego County, judges' courtroom assignments shift. This year there will be three new judges in Dependency Court. Presiding Judge Kimberlee Lagotta is one of those leaving. She will be missed as she's been a strong advocate for foster youth and has worked closely with VFC over the last ten years. She was first assigned to the juvenile division in 2010 and was named Presiding Judge of the Juvenile Court in January 2018.

### Juvenile Justice Program



One of the objectives of my visit was to observe and learn more about the VFC's Juvenile Justice Program which began in 2019 and aims to serve foster youth who have both Dependency and Delinquency cases.

### Background

There are ten total courtrooms at the Juvenile Courthouse in San Diego. Five of the courtrooms are Dependency courts covering foster cases and VFC has staff in each courtroom. The other courtrooms handle Juvenile Delinquency cases. There are three kinds of juvenile delinquency courts that VFC serves in addition to the 5 dependency courts: 1) RISE (Resiliency is Strength and Empowerment) – for kids involved in sexual trafficking, 2) Dual Court – for foster youth involved in both the dependency and delinquency systems, and 3) JFAST (Juvenile Forensic Assistance for Stabilization and Treatment) – for youth who have mental health issues and are on probation. VFC Advocacy Supervisor, Jessica Miller, oversees 36 CASA's, attends daily RISE meetings and takes shifts in JFAST. Advocacy Supervisor, Giselle Acosta, oversees CASA's in Dual Court and takes shifts in JFAST.

### RISE

The RISE court started in November 2017 to address the needs of youth who are victims of sexual trafficking. CASA's began working in that courtroom in early 2018. RISE is a collaborative program in which probation officers, social workers, therapists, DA's, judges, VFC staff, and public defenders all meet daily to screen cases, develop service plans, review progress, and determine which youth are ready to graduate from the program. The goal is to make decisions with a rehabilitative approach rather than a punitive one. The program is voluntary and minors must agree to participate and have their cases transferred to this specialized court. Families members may also participate and receive services. Those who do participate are connected with several services as part of an individualized plan with monthly progress reports. Education and job skills, mental health counseling or trauma therapy, substance abuse rehabilitation, and other programs are stressed. The probation department takes the lead in RISE cases and coordinates services which means social workers consult on cases, but do not have primary responsibility for the youth. It's important to note that not all RISE cases involve foster youth. In those that CASA's are assigned to assist foster youth, they help counsel youth to consider and follow legal advice and ultimately make difficult, adult decisions. The reason for this added responsibility is public defenders are assigned to cases, but can only counsel, not make decisions for youth. CASA's also help coordinate services with the probation department. The court terminates jurisdiction when youth are deemed "ready" and their record is sealed so they get a fresh start and no stigma is attached to what they've been through.

### Dual Court

The Dual Court serves children in both the dependency and juvenile court systems (crossover youth). When a youth's case is referred for dual status, both dependency and delinquency court have jurisdiction over the youth and the Dual Court judge must make a determination to accept the case. Once in Dual Court, the first important decision is settling which agency will take the lead, probation or child welfare. Decisions are based on the severity of the offenses and where the youth is housed. By hearing dual status cases in one courtroom, judges who have experience in both systems, can oversee coordinated service delivery and ensure that the social workers and probation officers work as a team to assist the youth obtain services and complete the terms of their probation. In this court, parents can also choose to be involved and can attend services. Advocacy Supervisors attend weekly meetings along with the team of social workers, probation officers, DA's, judges, childrens' attorneys, and public defenders, to discuss cases. VFC assigns CASA's to the majority of cases in this court.

### JFAST Court

In JFAST Court, the team includes judges, VFC staff, public defenders, probation officers, DA's, staff of the Stabilization, Treatment, Assessment and Transition program, and a doctor from the juvenile treatment clinic. The team meets weekly to review candidates for the program, develop treatment plans, and assess youth progression/graduation. The program's objective is to enroll participants in individualized mental health programs that utilize a community treatment approach and can include individual and/or group therapy, case management, wrap-around services, education assistance, and referral to medication assistance. Not all JFAST youth are foster youth.



## **Fundraising**

- The development department is fully staffed now with 5 full-time members, 1 part-timer, and 2 interns
- The local radio station, KPBS, featured VFC on a segment highlighting area charities
- Kelly Douglas began meeting with donors over the summer and continues to build relationships with existing supporters as well as lapsed and new donors.

## **Courtroom Observation**

- I had a chance to speak with Judge Kimberlee Lagotta before the afternoon case calendar began. She mentioned several things: 1) The judges feel an obligation and a sense of responsibility to ensure that children's needs are met; 2) CASA's reports are very valuable to judges who often read them before other documents in the case file for insights into the facts of the case, the gaps in care, as well as positive attributes of each child; 3) The one-on-one relationship between a CASA and a child can't be replicated by anyone else – social workers, attorneys, or judges; 4) there was early resistance to the Dual Court but now judges are the largest source of referrals because they've seen the positive results; and 5) she appreciates CASA's working closely with probation, social workers on each case and also facilitating visits with siblings and family.
- During the afternoon session, I observed several Dual Court cases in Judge Lagotta's courtroom for 2 hours. I found it valuable to learn about each case, hear the advocates on all sides, and listen to the youths' comments on their progress.

## **Stats per FY 2019-2020 Q2 Report ending Dec. 31, 2019:**

- Total active CASA's: 974
- Children served: 1,960 (69 in delinquency and 1,891 in dependency)
- Children with CASA's: 1,372
- Children served through Case Liaison Program: 519
- Children served through Case Assessment Program: 869
- Volunteer Retention: 25 returning volunteers, 138 resigned
- New training class of 40 potential volunteers started in January
- Juveniles served: 99 since start of program 2 years ago, 28 as of Dec.
- Price per CASA volunteer \$2,500

## **Executive Director/ CEO Priorities**

- Kelly Douglas is currently focused on 4 things:
  - building relationships with stakeholders – board, staff, judges, funders
  - fundraising – expanding support and bringing back former supporters
  - volunteer recruitment
  - developing ways to measure and evaluate outcomes
- Kelly is holding quarterly all-staff meetings. Her intention is to make everyone feel included and comfortable participating. She makes an effort to start with ice-breakers so she and staff can get to know each other better and there is always an educational component to each meeting.
- At the request of a donor who pledged to fund measurement and evaluation work, VFC is holding a retreat with USC researchers, staff, volunteers, and former foster youth this spring. The goal is to brainstorm strategic questions VFC should be able to answer about outcomes and narrow the list to 3 to 5 outcomes they should measure. After the brainstorming sessions, researchers will work on a measurement and evaluation plan.

## **Challenges**

My meetings with Kelly Douglas were very positive. She is an experienced manager and is extremely friendly, and forthright. She acknowledged the challenges in stabilizing the institutional after recent leadership turnover, but



feel that staff is very receptive to her efforts to build relationships. She has the confidence of the board and works closely with board members on her fundraising strategy. Her willingness to tackle larger issues such as developing a measurement and evaluation plan signals a few things: 1) she is not afraid of taking on new challenges, 2) she's thinking about the big picture, and 3) is looking towards the long-term well-being of the organization and its' ability to appeal to new donors.

### **Institutional & Program Takeaways**

My impressions of each team member were very positive. Everyone I met at VFC was engaging, knowledgeable, and extremely committed. I am always impressed by VFC staff's work ethic, knowledge of individual cases, the court systems, and their overall compassion for children they serve. VFC staff must skillfully manage relationships with a wide range of people from donors to judges to volunteers to children to law enforcement and in my observations, they navigate them all very well.

### **Questions for my next visit will include, among other topics**

The transition of new judges, changes as a result of a new presiding judge, the status of recruitment and retention efforts, the waitlists and time on the waitlists, the status of new research efforts, success recruiting new and lapsed donors, efforts to increase the budget and serve more children, staffing turnover, the development of any innovations in programming, etc...

