



BRIGHTER FUTURES FOSTER CARE CAMPAIGN REPORT

THE PROJECT

Focusing Philanthropy and Voices for Children launched the Brighter Futures Foster Care Campaign 2020 to provide individualized advocacy services for more than 180 foster youth in San Diego County. Our program recruits, trains, supports, and supervises community volunteers referred to as Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) to serve as individual advocates for foster children until permanency is achieved, or the case has been closed. They are frequently the only consistent, caring adult in a foster child's life. Their presence on a child's case leads to better outcomes by virtue of being the one consistent and caring adult in a child's life. This level of individual attention and support is unparalleled elsewhere in the foster care system.

FOCUSING PHILANTHROPY 2020 CAMPAIGN FINANCIAL IMPACT

Focusing Philanthropy played an instrumental role in our ability to assign CASAs to 180 abused and neglected youth during Fiscal Year 2019-2020. Voices for Children and Focusing Philanthropy partnered with a goal to raise \$450,000 through the Brighter Futures Foster Care Campaign, in which \$300,000 of donations secured by Voices for Children were matched with a \$150,000 grant from Focusing Philanthropy. This year's campaign ran from March 1, 2020 - June 30, 2020. Three very generous donors in San Diego contributed, with gifts ranging from \$50,000 to \$120,000 totaling \$370,937.

As a direct result of the gifts raised during this campaign, Voices for Children has recruited, trained, and matched 180 new CASA volunteers. The CASAs funded by this generous grant will continue to provide advocacy services for those children and youth in the year to come. Voices for Children is incredibly grateful for the support of Focusing Philanthropy and your organization's belief in our mission.

FOCUSING PHILANTHROPY 2020 CAMPAIGN PROGRAM IMPACT

During the campaign this year, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in VFC adapting our program operations in order to meet the needs of children in foster care. VFC shifted CASA recruitment and training activities to virtual platforms. In April, the recruitment team piloted virtual information sessions for prospective volunteers and is now continuing to offer virtual information sessions three times per month. The training team launched VFC's first virtual version of Advocate University in April and subsequent sessions of Advocate University have seen enrollment numbers on par with VFC's previous in-person training sessions.

VFC has also evolved the way that CASAs deliver services to foster youth. Prior to July 1, 2020, CASAs provided children with support through phone and video calls and found creative ways to show children that they care. In-person visits between CASAs and foster youth resumed with physical distancing and other restrictions on July 1. CASAs are providing critical advocacy by communicating with children's caregivers, family members, social workers, attorneys, and judges. As caregivers and family members face new obstacles including school closures and lack of access to supportive services, CASAs are stepping in to provide support, information, and assistance in accessing helpful resources.

VFC has also acted as a liaison between case children and other child welfare professionals during the COVID-19 crisis. Between March and May this year, all non-emergency court hearings were postponed, however, San Diego County Juvenile Court judges requested that CASAs continue to submit regular court reports to help them stay informed about the priority needs of each foster youth. Children’s Legal Services, the organization that provides attorneys to foster children, requested that every CASA provide a summary about their case, including information about a child’s safety, health, housing, education, and contact with family members. These requests from child welfare professionals speak to the value they place on a CASA’s insight about a child’s well-being and needs.

Some specific examples of CASA support during the early weeks of the COVID-19 outbreak include:

- Addressing food insecurity by delivering groceries to an immunocompromised, non-minor foster youth whose health challenges placed her at increased risk of contracting COVID-19 and restricted her ability to use public transportation to purchase food.
- Helping a foster parent to obtain medication for a medically fragile foster child.
- Advocating for a child to remain in a group home placement that was scheduled to end on March 31, 2020. As a result, group home staff agreed to allow the youth to remain in the placement through the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Responding to a child’s call for help during a mental health crisis. Within hours, the CASA found a health facility that was able to see the child and adjust their medication.

The impact CASAs have on the lives of the foster youth they serve is immeasurable. With the intervention and support of a CASA volunteer, children and youth in foster care have someone to rely on. Today, given all the unknowns for the future, children lean on their CASAs more than ever. The following three stories demonstrate the relationships and support that CASAs provide to vulnerable children.

Kyra

Kyra entered foster care in 2013 due to ongoing domestic violence incidents in her home that resulted in her physical harm. At that time, she moved in with relatives, which seemed like a perfect solution once she was removed from her home. She was also matched with CASA Maria at that time. Then, in 2017, Kyra entered foster care a second time because her relatives had changed their minds about being her guardian and relinquished their rights. Kyra was devastated. She has been placed in a number of foster homes, relative placements, and group homes over the past few years, and CASA Maria has been an emotional support to her throughout these placement transitions.

Most recently, Kyra was placed at San Pasqual Academy, a residential campus that lacks a feeling of home. She frequently expressed interest in being placed in a smaller group home setting. CASA Maria and foster care professionals worked diligently to identify a smaller placement that would help Kyra to thrive. When a potential positive placement was found, Maria was quick to schedule a virtual visit with Kyra as a result of the COVID-19 Stay at Home order. Within a month, Kyra was placed in a smaller group home, and is thriving in this setting by all accounts. Over the last seven years, Maria has known Kyra longer than the social workers and attorney on her case. She was in the best position to advocate for

the teen’s housing placement given her long term relationship and knowledge of Kyra’s goals, strengths, and desires.

Zak

Zak’s mom was a habitual drug user throughout his childhood. As a result, Zak became good at taking care of himself for long periods of time while she was out. As he got older, her drug use became worse. When he was 14, she took away his house key and told him to wait to be picked up at the local Jack in the Box restaurant. For months, Zak would leave school and sit and wait at the Jack in the Box until she arrived. Zak was loyal to his mother and waited patiently. It wasn’t until she didn’t arrive one late night that the store manager called the police and Zak, shortly thereafter, entered foster care.

Zak’s experience in foster care was not unlike his peers. He experienced frequent moves from foster home to group home, school transfers, and the general emotional trauma that results from being removed from home. Before long, Zak was matched with his CASA, Sarah. Sarah quickly took steps to obtain Zak’s educational rights and found that he was under-performing in most subjects. Sarah requested a special education evaluation for Zak and she ensured that he received extra support as he worked to catch up academically. Sarah accompanied Zak to each of his scheduled court hearings. She used her court reports to advocate for Zak to have the opportunity to participate in after school programs and summer camps. Through Sarah’s support and advocacy, Zak’s grades began to improve as did his outlook on life and future opportunities. Together, Zak and Sarah met challenges and worked to resolve them through advocacy and mentorship. Today, Zak is still in foster care, and without Sarah, he would not have a consistent and caring adult in his life. Zak feels supported thanks to the one-on-one attention of his CASA, Sarah.

Devon

Devon is a 16-year-old young man who is interested in video game design and car manufacturing. Devon entered foster care one year ago after being removed from his home due to neglect. Devon had many challenges when he first entered the foster care system. He was initially placed in the hospital due to threats of self-harm. After being discharged from the hospital, he was placed at Polinsky Children’s Center (PCC). All too often, it is difficult to find a foster care homes that are willing to accept older youth, and Devon was no exception. Although PCC is designed as a temporary housing placement, Devon remained there for more than six months while awaiting a housing placement. During his time at PCC, Devon had access to a social worker, an attorney, and mental health providers, but he felt alone. In January 2020, CASA Luke was assigned to Devon’s case.

Luke began biweekly visits with Devon at PCC, where he quickly learned that Devon was a curious teen who enjoyed learning how things are put together. Luke and Devon quickly bonded over an engineering kit that Luke brought to their meetings. Luke also learned that Devon had previously received an autism diagnosis, but the additional services required by his individualized education plan (IEP) were not being provided. Luke accepted the responsibility of holding Devon’s educational rights and when Devon was placed at a group home in early March, Luke worked closely with Devon’s new school to ensure that they received a copy of his IEP and other school records. Luke also met with the school leadership to make sure that they had the capacity to support Devon’s learning. Devon finally had stable housing and a school program that was designed to meet his needs. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic threatened to disrupt Devon’s newfound stability. Although Devon has struggled with transitions in the past, Luke is

helping him to adapt to the new challenges brought on by the pandemic. Luke is connecting with Devon through weekly phone calls, and he arranged for virtual, one-on-one tutoring for the boy.

During Devon’s first nine months in the foster care system, he was isolated, alone, and lacked a stable place to live. With the support of Luke and the staff at his new group home, Devon has a place to begin moving forward for the first time since he entered the foster care system.

CONCLUSION

Focusing Philanthropy played an instrumental role in our ability to assign CASAs to 180 abused and neglected children. We are incredibly grateful for your support and your belief in our mission. Because of your generosity, children were matched with the life-saving support of a CASA volunteer during a truly unprecedented time. Together, we have changed the lives of 180 of the most vulnerable youth in San Diego County. Thank you.