

## **Focusing Philanthropy 2020 Campaign CASA of Los Angeles Report**

For over 40 years, CASA of Los Angeles (CASA/LA) has been the only organization in Los Angeles providing court appointed advocates to youth in foster care, helping these children and youth navigate not only the trials of the courtroom, but also the trials of a challenged childhood. Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) help transform the lives of children who need them the most—children who lack safe and committed adults in their lives—by helping them to become self-sufficient and responsible young men and women. For many years, CASA/LA served 500-600 children with intensive individual advocacy annually. With the support of generous community partners, we have increased the number of children we serve from 570 in FY2011 to 1,294 in FY2020 – an increase of 5% from FY2019 and 15% from FY2018.

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting closure of schools, courts, and service agencies last year and into this year heightened the already critical need for CASA advocacy in the lives of children and youth in foster care. Prior to the pandemic, children and youth served by CASA were already struggling to find and stay in safe, permanent housing. They experienced significant challenges accessing educational opportunities and services. It was already difficult for them to find good medical and mental health care. The pandemic has only exacerbated these challenges. CASA volunteers are providing important social, emotional and logistical support during this time to foster parents, group home staff, and other caregivers and finding their role more important than ever. CASAs have been instrumental in ensuring that children have visits with family and friends and that their mental health and developmental services continue, even as they transitioned online. CASAs are serving as a critical communication link between the child and their attorney and social worker as all professionals adjust to their new working environment and less frequent court hearings. CASAs are attending virtual court hearings, providing medical care advocacy and continue to meet the emotional needs for the youth they serve.

We are proud to report that we continued to expand our program improve our services, despite the pandemic and its challenges. In FY2020, CASA/LA had 1,092 active volunteers, of which 20% were male, 7% were African-American, and 9% were Latinx/Hispanic, all populations CASA/LA has attempted to reach over recent years. We recruited, trained and swore in 275 new volunteers over the course of the fiscal year.

### **Volunteer Services Program**

Throughout the year, the Volunteer Services team provided 27 in-service trainings, which is the continued education program in which CASA volunteers are required to participate. Last year, the team provided the following trainings: 241.1 Dual Status; Benefits for Foster Youth; CBD/Cannabis; Court Report Writing; CSEC; DCFS 101; Domestic Violence: Myths, Reality, and the Best Way to Advocate for Youth Involved; General Education; Grief: Supporting a Child through Grief as a CASA; Hathaway-Sycamores Tour (Short Term Residential Treatment Program, or STRTP); Healthcare for Foster Youth; Hillside Tour (STRTP); LGBTQ 101; Mental Health Stigma and Discrimination; Obtaining a Legal Name and Gender Change in Dependency Court; Planned Parenthood Workshop: Sex, Sex Orientation and Gender Differentiation; Queer Youth and their Mental Health; Reproductive and Sexual Health for Foster Youth; Special Education During a Pandemic; TAY Mental Health Services; Tour Camp Waldorf; Trans Youth and Their Health; UCLA TIES for Families.

In addition, the team administered 32 sessions total of the Early Childhood and Transition Age Youth modules from our online learning path, which offered volunteers a digital learning platform about various topics and issues within child welfare.

In the latter half of FY2020, in the beginning stages of the pandemic, our team sustained and supported our current CASAs with ongoing trainings and workshops to support their work despite the ever-changing social and education conditions for the children and youth they serve. CASA/LA's focus has always been the children we serve, but last year and into this year we have also had to care for the health of our volunteers during the pandemic. We rapidly adjusted requirements for in-person visits, taught CASA volunteers how to optimize virtual meeting software, provided dozens of virtual in-service training opportunities and share and support groups, and staff continue to hold regular phone, email, and zoom check ins with volunteers to collaborate, learn, and socialize. Many of our volunteers are themselves isolated during this pandemic. Being a CASA offers a community and a sense of purpose and productivity. CASAs have been crucial during this pandemic, supporting their youth in creative and unexpected ways. They have secured laptops for youth, helped them find safe living placements, kept spirits up over Zoom, helped them cope with fear and isolation during the safer-at-home orders, as well as remained a caring adult they can count on.

### **Challenges & Opportunities**

CASA/LA completed a detailed strategic planning process wherein we determined that 12,000 children in foster care in Los Angeles County have an immediate need for a CASA. This includes all children and youth living in group homes, all children identified as medically fragile, all "crossover" youth who are also in the juvenile justice system, all Non-Minor Dependents (young adults 18-21 who are in extended foster care) and transition-aged youth (aged 12-17) about to age out of foster care, in addition to high-risk cases of children 0-5. We plan to meet our goal of serving all 12,000 children who need us within ten years by scaling operations and through new programmatic strategies. We will work with attorneys, judges and other stakeholders to prioritize and facilitate appointments and referrals and continue our ambitious recruitment and training program. In FY2020, we hired a part-time Marketing Coordinator to help implement CASA/LA's strategic plan across digital, social media, and traditional advertising platforms, connecting prospective volunteers more directly with our online and in-person information sessions.

Prior to and at the start of the pandemic in March 2020, the total number of open child welfare cases in LA county hovered around 30,000 (already the largest child welfare system in the country). Today, that number has risen to 38,000 open cases, or an increase of greater than 25% in less than a year. Hundreds of these children sit on CASA/LA's waitlist, and we have a pipeline of hundreds of volunteers waiting to begin training and be appointed as CASAs. We have successfully pivoted all of our advocacy programs and volunteer services to a virtual landscape, and are able to continue operating remotely as long as it remains necessary. However, our waitlist continues to grow as the need for CASA/LA's services becomes more dire by the day. The pandemic and shut-down orders also created challenges for CASA/LA to recruit and train new volunteers to ensure that we continue to meet the needs of children in the system and the goals of our strategic plan. However, our team shifted quickly to online recruiting and training models using Zoom and both live and pre-recorded webinars. This change, alongside our marketing efforts, resulted in a surge of volunteers. Our virtual information sessions are reaching 200-300 people monthly across LA County. This pivot required new learning, new systems, and investment in technology that we did not anticipate. FY2020 and FY2021 presented and continues to present a particular challenge for CASA/LA as we usually raise nearly a third of our annual revenue from events. While we

have successfully moved to virtual events, we face new challenges raising the funds required to better serve our children and youth whose advocacy needs have only increased during this pandemic. The CASA/LA team is poised to meet the unique demands created by the pandemic and continue growing so that we can meet the need in LA County for advocacy, but we will depend on the support of community partners.

## **Evaluation**

CASA/LA assesses outcomes measurement through our monitoring database Efforts to Outcomes (ETO) Social Solutions. When a case is assigned, both the Advocate Supervisor and the CASA volunteer examine the case and rate the status and level of risk of the child on a baseline scale along the three core dimensions of safety, permanency and wellbeing. Of the cases that closed in FY2020 (331 cases), 54% closed because advocacy goals were met. Of CASA youth experiencing risk to safety, 57% experienced improved safety outcomes, 58% of CASA youth with educational goals experienced improved educational outcomes, 56% of all CASA youth experienced improved mental health from assessment to case closure. In addition, 62% of cases resulted in a permanent placement for the child or youth. CASA/LA's Director of Research and Evaluation is responsible for guiding the evaluation of our programs and using the data we glean from ETO to measure success and change the programs to better serve children and their families.

## **Next Steps**

Over the next two years, CASA/LA intends to scale growth by:

- Increasing the number of children served each year to meet a goal of 3000 children served by FY23.
- Recruiting and training more CASA volunteers to meet our goal of 1500 CASAs by FY23 by continuing to grow our online recruitment and training efforts.
- Reducing risks and increasing positive outcomes for over 75% of the children we serve.

CASA/LA usually recruits an average of 350 volunteers per year, but we have identified three strategies to significantly increase that number: 1) a major three-year marketing and fundraising campaign to be launched during FY2021 (Three to 3000), 2) short-term advocacy programs to provide additional volunteer opportunities and 3) an online learning path that will provide volunteers with a digital learning platform on various topics and issues within child welfare.

CASA of Los Angeles is incredibly grateful to Focusing Philanthropy for your support of and deep belief in our work.