



Focusing  
Philanthropy

## CASA Los Angeles Diligence Trip Report Los Angeles, CA September 30, 2021

### CASA LA Program Visited

- Los Angeles County Edelman Courthouse

### Focusing Philanthropy Staff

- Teresa Burton

### CASA LA Staff

- Charity Chandler-Cole, CEO
- Marie Carpenter, Director of Institutional Giving
- Dave Gustavson, CASA Volunteer
- Lucy Lee, CASA Volunteer, Essential History Program

### Executive Summary

On September 30, 2021, Teresa Burton of Focusing Philanthropy visited the LA County Edelman Courthouse to meet with CASA LA staff and volunteers. Due to Covid-19, the CASA LA office was empty except for a few people, the courthouse was closed to visitors, and court proceedings were all being conducted online.

### Background

#### *Discussion with CEO, Charity Chandler-Cole*

Charity Chandler-Cole has forged a career as a nonprofit leader and advocate. Growing up, Chandler-Cole entered the foster care and juvenile justice systems at age 16. Since then, she has forged a career as a nonprofit leader and advocate. Most recently she managed federal and awards and contracts at the AIDS Healthcare Foundation. Before that, she founded Transformative Management Solutions, a consultancy helping nonprofits, public and political organizations in implementing social justice initiatives. In addition to her impressive professional background, Chandler-Cole is the board chair for the Anti-Recidivism Coalition and also serves on the Los Angeles County Commission for Children and Families, where she co-chairs the racial justice committee. She has a Master's in Public Administration from Cal State Northridge, a Bachelor's in Communication from Loyola Marymount, and is currently finishing her Doctorate in Education Leadership for Social Justice at Loyola Marymount. Chandler-Cole is also raising four children and serves as a relative caregiver for her nephew.



## CASA Program Priorities

### *Expansion*

As new CEO, Charity Chandler-Cole hopes to make some important changes to the CASA program. First, she is tasked with implementing the **3 to 3000 Campaign** to increase the number of foster children served with CASAs to 3,000 children annually by 2023 and to build a path to serving 12,000 annually in the next 10 to 12 years.

### *Recruitment*

Chandler-Cole plans to put significant efforts into recruiting diverse volunteers that will better reflect the diversity of the children in foster care. CASA LA received a grant from the Pritzker Foundation to hire a marketing company to implement this project. She is also hosting webinars with other local community based organizations to highlight their efforts and create a sense of collaboration in the community of nonprofits that work with families impacted by the foster care system.

### *Training*

Her second priority is to expand CASA LA's **prevention and intervention** work. She is hoping that this effort will result in the eventual reduction of children in foster care in LA County. Efforts will include **training** mandatory reporters and prosecutors to recognize the difference between poverty, neglect, and child abuse. For example, mandated reporters are taught to report suspected abuse cases without asking questions of the child or parents. As a result, a hotline receives little to no information before referring the cases to DCFS. After investigation, DCFS finds that 90% of cases are unsubstantiated and 88% of substantiated cases are due to neglect which can often be remedied quickly with referrals to local social service agencies as opposed to opening dependency cases. Charity thinks that one change, appointing CASAs before non-emergency removals, could be an effective way to provide judges with detailed information before they make potentially harmful decisions.

### *TAY (Transitional Age Youth)*

Another effort in the area of prevention and intervention is stopping the **intergenerational cycle of foster care** which young women in foster care are more than twice as likely to become pregnant as teens than their peers and repeat the pattern of losing their losing to the foster system. Chandler-Cole is working on several projects to provide CASAs and supportive services to young mothers so they do not lose their children to the system. More details on this program will be forthcoming.

### *Essential History Project*

A former CASA employee and now volunteer, Lucy Lee, is in graduate school and works on the Essential History Project. Volunteers, many of whom are social work students, are trained, background checked, and assigned to read an entire case file and summarize it for judges and social workers. Typical cases involve medically fragile children or those with significant mental health histories. Lee recently summarized the file on a case involving a three year-old child with cognitive impairment who was medically underweight and malnourished. Her report was 11 pages and covered 4 topics: 1) physical health, 2) mental health, 3) educational testing, and 4) social relationships. Lucy intends to continue as a volunteer in the program and was proud to report that volunteers had reviewed 80 cases during the last 2 months. The program is a particularly good fit for students and other volunteers who are not able to commit to a full 18-month case.



### *Juvenile Justice*

racial justice and prevention work. Her goals in racial justice will focus on youth justice – helping transitional age youth in the juvenile justice system (who are primarily people of color) navigate the system and become independent adults. Her prevention goal encompasses most of CASA’s current work with a new intention to reduce the number of children in foster care by 1) helping children return to their parents, 2) supporting families receiving services to keep their children in their homes, and 3) collaborating with communities, faith-based organizations, and other nonprofits in the sector to recruit younger, more diverse volunteers and build awareness of the needs of foster children.

### Youth Justice

#### *Diversion Program*

In an effort to create strong partnerships to serve dual status (foster/juvenile) youth better, Charity Chandler-Cole recently held a training for 20 prosecutors in the DA’s office on the subject of juvenile diversion. Her message to them was to find opportunities for compassion by diverting juveniles who are current or former foster children in order to avoid creating the next generation of prison inmates. She reports that judges are very open to this effort, consistently requesting information and help with cases, and appointing CASAs to be a trusted advocate and caring adult. In a typical dual status case, a CASA creates a path for the judge to give kids the benefit of the doubt in the same way they do for kids who have parents. To date, CASA has provided 60 volunteers in youth justice cases – the goal is to double that number in 2022.

#### *Avoiding Arrests*

Another of Charity’s goals is to help caretakers avoid creating arrest histories for foster kids with minor offenses. For example, she would like to train CASAs to work with foster parents before they call the police to report a child as AWOL. Currently, DCFS instructs foster parents to call the police when a foster child goes AWOL. (She’d also like to change the term AWOL to “left without permission”.) When a foster parent calls the police, an arrest warrant is created, the child is apprehended and arrested, creating a record. The punishment is 4 weeks in county jail and/or taking away visitation privileges with the child’s family. Note, it is illegal to take away a child’s visitation privileges, but it’s regularly done. Similarly, group home staff are told to call the police for minor offenses.

To illustrate their points, Charity and Dave reported the following examples:

- Recently, an LA group home called the police when a teen was accused by another teen of stealing \$10. The teen spent 10 days in county jail before a CASA was able to intervene and convince the judge to release him.
- In another case, CASA volunteer Dave Gustavson had the chance to educate lawyers, social workers, and a judge on the law that prohibits children from being forced to wear cuffs and shackles in a family court. In that case, a foster child was accused of stealing a bike, then removed from his group home, sent to a juvenile facility, and then brought to court in cuffs and shackles.

### Staffing & Budget

Despite the pandemic, CASA LA donors have been generous and supportive over the last two years. With the additional funds raised, Charity is hiring at least 2 more Advocacy Supervisors who will each work with 50 volunteers.



Another piece of good news is that CASA LA is now the only CASA organization in the state to have a state budget allocation. Lobbying efforts are underway to increase the allocation next year. With 33,000 children currently in care, LA is the largest foster system in the state and the country.

### Story

Marie Carpenter reported on a recent case that emphasized the importance of CASAs for the special attention they give children – attention that social workers are not able to provide. A CASA was assigned to a five-year old girl who had been abused and was severely traumatized. The child’s behavioral problems were so difficult that she had been moved several times since entering the foster system including on a holiday. The CASA assigned to the case found the name of a woman buried in the case file. The woman was believed to be the child’s grandmother until a paternity test showed she wasn’t related to the child. The CASA found the name and contacted her anyway. The woman had helped take care of the child and had been trying to find her. She was willing to foster adopt the child despite not being her biological grandmother. The CASA was able to place the girl in a safe, loving home and focus on making sure she received the services she needed to heal.

