

Voices for Children Diligence Trip Report Riverside, CA August 30, 2022

Program Visited

- VFC Riverside, CA

Focusing Philanthropy Staff

- Jaron Vogelsang (JV)
- Pedro Kuroiwa (PK)

Voices for Children Staff

- Jessica Muñoz (Executive Director, Riverside)
- Brianna Miller (Philanthropy Manager)
- Sharon Morris (Director of Programs)
- Joel (CASA Volunteer)
- Deborah (CASA Volunteer)

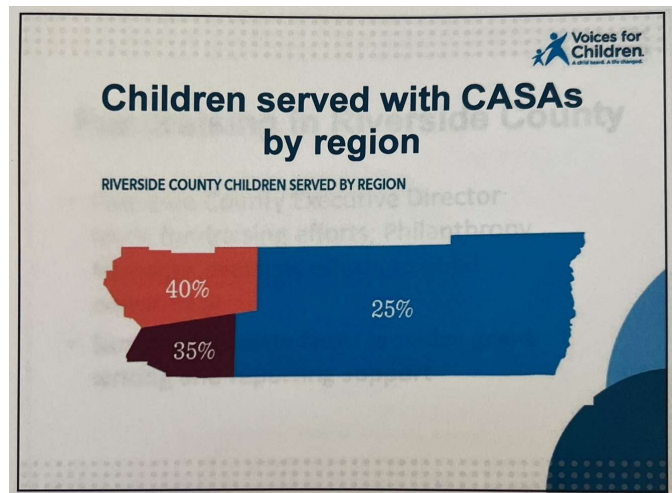
Executive Summary

On August 30, 2022, Focusing Philanthropy carried out a diligence visit to Voices for Children (VFC) Riverside at their office in Riverside, California. The visit was the first time that Jaron Vogelsang (JV) and Pedro Kuroiwa (PK) visited VFC Riverside, but the organization has been visited by other FP staff numerous times in the past. The visit included a detailed overview of the context in Riverside County, program and fundraising updates, a discussion about CASA recruitment, training, and retention, and initial planning for VFC's 2023 campaign. The main takeaways from the visit include:

- VFC Riverside, similarly to the other CASA programs (San Diego and Los Angeles) supported by Focusing Philanthropy, provides an essential, life-changing service to foster children and youth. CASA programs are also seen as critical by dependency courts, as demonstrated by the fact that the court specifically asked Voices for Children to begin a program in Riverside. In almost all situations, CASAs are the only consistent adult in foster children's lives and know their cases better than anyone else – including judges, attorneys, and social workers.
- Although VFC Riverside has consistently grown over the last 5 years, it is not yet able to meet the need for CASAs in the county. At any given time, there are 4,000 children within the foster care system in the county, but VFC currently manages 500 CASA volunteers. VFC Riverside, unlike other CASA programs that aim to serve every foster child in the county, operates on a referral system where children/youth are referred to VFC by the court or social services. Consistently, there are approximately 110 children/youth that have been referred to VFC, but not yet matched with a CASA. While VFC would like to serve more foster youth, they are constrained by available of

funding and have found volunteer recruitment to be more challenging than other areas because of the size of the relative lack major donors in Riverside.

- VFC is proactively focusing on increasing its donor base and recently hired a new staff member to focus on development. VFC is optimistic that this will enable them to increase their campaign goal in 2023 to serve additional children and move closer towards being able to provide a CASA to every child/youth in the county that needs one.



Background

Each year, approximately 4,000 children will spend time in the foster care system in Riverside County. Each child has experienced multiple and often compounding traumatic experiences in the form of child abuse and neglect at the hands of a caregiver or parent. These experiences are often the result of intergenerational trauma caused by poverty, racism, and/or discrimination. Once in foster care, children face new stressors: being separated from their families, living with strangers, and frequently lacking consistent and caring adult figures in their lives.

Research shows that children in foster care experience poor educational outcomes, homelessness, and underemployment as a result of time spent in the foster care system. Children are twice as likely as their peers to have developmental delays, asthma, and speech problems. Only 54% of foster youth graduate high school within four years, compared to 83% of their peers, and only 4% of former foster youth obtain a college degree by age 26, compared to 36% of the general population. According to John Burton Advocates for Youth, one in three youth who exits foster care in California experiences homelessness within two years.

Overwhelmingly, the overburdened and bureaucratic foster care system cannot meet the individual needs of the children it is supposed to protect. Its shortcomings—including daunting caseloads and a high turnover rate for child welfare professionals—result in additional childhood trauma that has lifelong impacts.

Voices for Children uses the CASA model, first developed in Seattle in 1977, in which trained and supervised community volunteers called Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) are matched with individual children in foster care to advocate for their best interests. CASAs help judges make better-informed decisions by providing critical information and insights about the children, their education, mental and physical health, and overall well-being.

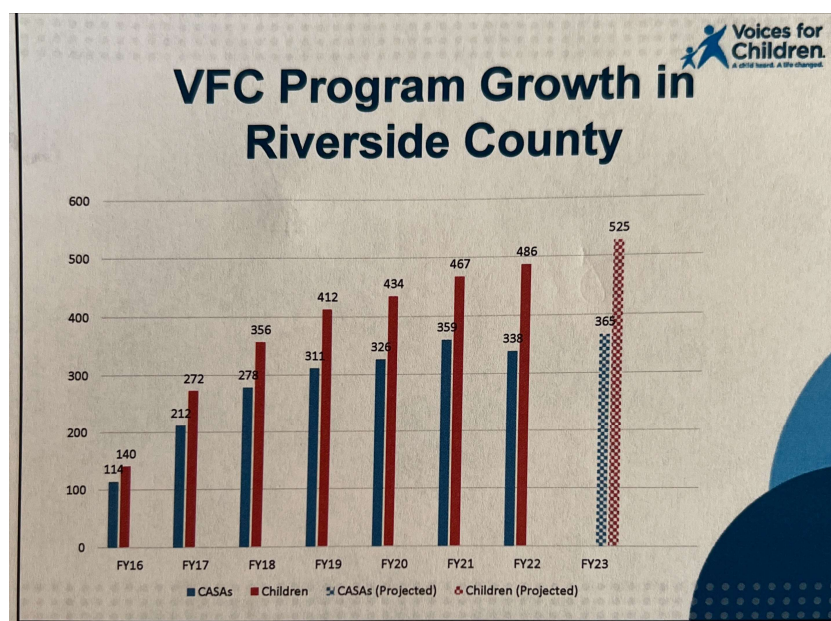
VFC provides critical support to children in foster care by matching them with volunteer CASAs who advocate on their behalf in court, at school, in healthcare settings, and throughout the community.

VFC Riverside supervises nearly 500 CASAs, each of whom devotes 10–15 hours per month to their cases. They visit their youth and learn about their strengths, personality, concerns, and goals. CASAs also speak

with family members, caregivers, teachers, healthcare providers, and child welfare professionals. CASAs gain a holistic understanding of a child’s situation and gather information about each child’s education, mental and physical health, housing placement, and overall well-being.

Although it often functions as an independent organization, Voices for Children Riverside is part of Voices for Children San Diego. In 2014, the previous CASA program that was operational in Riverside County closed due to management and fundraising challenges. In 2015, the Riverside County Judicial Council and Juvenile Court requested that Voices for Children San Diego expand their program to Riverside County because they felt the services provided by CASAs were so essential. Soon after, Voices for Children began to serve Riverside County. In the years since the program has grown and consistently serves more children each year.

Focusing Philanthropy has supported VFC Riverside since 2019 with four matching campaigns, representing \$855,000. VFC Riverside has consistently increased both the number of CASA volunteers that it manages and the number of foster youth that it serves, as shown in the chart below:



Discussion with CASA Volunteers

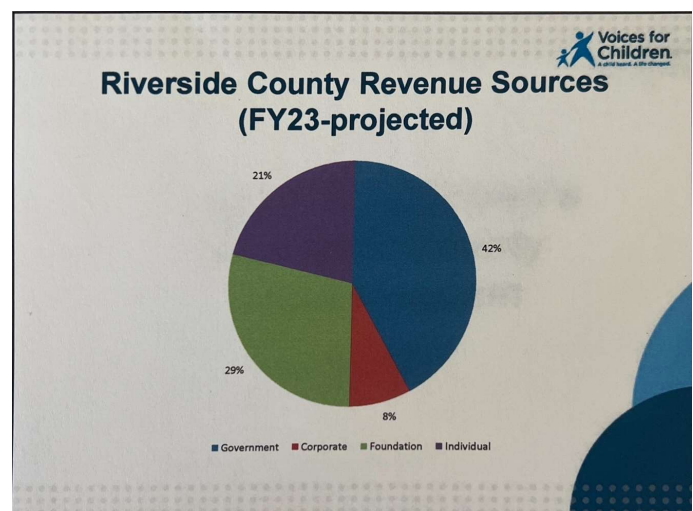
- JV and PK met with two CASA volunteers that were invited to attend the site visit by VFC Riverside.
- Deborah, a retired middle and high school teacher, has been serving as a CASA for seven years. She was matched with a boy when he was 13 years old and has been serving as his CASA ever since. This boy was in a very bad situation – by the age of 13, he had experienced 30 different foster care placements. With Deborah’s support, he was able to get into a better living situation and finish high school. While the boy continued to have some challenges, including running away on several occasions, Deborah’s support as a supportive adult (that was willing to push him when it was necessary) and a constant friend was instrumental in helping him access social services. When the boy turned 18, he still had not been placed in a permanent living situation, so Deborah helped him access services so he would not “age out” of foster care and experience the well-documented

negative consequences of aging out. He is now living in his own apartment, accessing social services like food and housing assistance, working part time, and is enrolled in community college.

- Joel, a man in his 30s, began serving as a CASA less than a year ago. He is one of a few male CASAs (less than 20% of VFC's CASAs are male) and was matched with a 13-year-old boy that specifically requested a male CASA. While he is still in the process of building trust with the boy, it is already apparent that the boy appreciates his CASA's friendship, love, and commitment. Joel has accompanied him to several court hearings and spends time with him at least once every week. Joel is excited to continue advocating on behalf of the boy and hopes to become a positive male role model in his life.

Key Observations

- Over the next year, VFC will focus on responsible, sustainable program growth by building a community advisory committee in Riverside County, growing individual and foundation fundraising, and enhancing volunteer recruitment strategies.
- VFC Riverside, unlike other CASA programs that aim to serve every foster child in the county, operates on a referral system where children/youth are referred to VFC by the court or social services. Consistently, there are approximately 110 children/youth that have been referred to VFC, but not yet matched with a CASA.
- Expanding VFC's potential pool of volunteers seems to be a significant barrier (more so than funding constraints) to the growth of the program and meeting the goal of being able to provide a CASA to any child/youth that needs one. This challenge is partly due to the context where they work – Riverside County's size and rates of poverty (compared to Los Angeles and San Diego) make it somewhat difficult to recruit additional CASA volunteers. Fortunately, once VFC successfully recruits volunteers, over 80% serve for at least 18 months. VFC recognizes that recruitment is challenging and they plan to address it in the coming year by increasing outreach through its community outreach committee and by adding a new staff member that will solely focus on recruitment. VFC Riverside also plans to discuss recruitment strategies with other CASA programs in Southern California so it can adopt best recruitment practices that have been successful in other areas.
- VFC has begun to focus more proactively on increasing its donor base, especially individual donors. VFC hopes this will enable them to increase their campaign goal in 2023 to serve additional children and move closer towards being able to provide a CASA to any child/youth in the county that needs one. However, given that individual donors only make up 21% of VFC Riverside's revenue, they have requested that donations from small family foundations count towards their side of the match if the 2023 campaign goal is significantly larger than previous campaigns.



Photos:



JV with Voices for Children Staff and CASA Volunteers