



Voices for Children San Diego Diligence Trip Report San Diego, CA July 13, 2022

Program Visited

- San Diego, CA – San Diego Juvenile Court

Focusing Philanthropy Staff

- Jaron Vogelsang (JV)
- Sam Roberts, Intern (SR)

Voices for Children San Diego Staff and Associates

- Kelly Douglas, President and CEO
- Rebecca Rader, Chief Philanthropy Officer
- Christina Piranio, Director of Philanthropy
- Megan Marashlian, Director of Advocacy
- Kelly Wilkinson, CASA Volunteer
- Vanessa, former foster youth that was supported by a CASA. Now a sophomore at UCLA.
- Honorable Judge Ana Espana

Executive Summary

FP staff visited Voices for Children San Diego (VFC SD) on July 13, 2022 for a diligence visit. The visit took place at VFC SD's office and at the San Diego Juvenile Court. The visit was the first time that Jaron Vogelsang (JV) 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 program, fundraising efforts, a discussion about CASA recruitment, training, and retention in addition to conversations with CASA volunteers and the presiding judge of the county dependency court.

Background

Voices for Children (VFC SD) transforms the lives of abused, abandoned, or neglected children by providing them with trained, volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs). In 1980, law student Kathryn Ashworth and social worker Elizabeth Bacon founded VFC in San Diego to improve the lives of children in foster care. The pair set up a desk in the courthouse hall to recruit volunteers to review children's case files. They soon adopted the emerging CASA model, first developed in Seattle in 1977, in which trained and supervised community volunteers called CASAs were 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.



Notably, VFC is now the largest CASA organization in California, in terms of the number of children served, and among the three largest of the nation's 948 CASA programs. 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. 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. When a CASA identifies unmet needs, they then advocate on a child's behalf to ensure that the child has access to the resources they need. Every six months, CASAs provide this information to the Court through a comprehensive written report, which helps judges to make critical decisions. CASAs commit to serving for at least 18 months, but many serve for the duration of a child's time in the foster care system. For many children in foster care, their CASA is the most consistent and caring adult in their lives.

Program Updates

VFC SD is undeniably achieving profoundly life changing impacts in the lives of thousands of foster children and youth in San Diego County. In FY 2021-2022, VFC SD provided advocacy and support to nearly 2,000 children and youth by training and deploying 980 CASA volunteers. VFC SD's CASAs provided direct ongoing advocacy and support to approximately 1,500 foster children and youth, while CASA staff provided more limited advocacy support to 500 children that did not require a long-term CASA. In addition to CASAs supporting foster children and youth, VFC SD is also implementing a smaller-scale Juvenile Justice program that connects CASAs to youth that are involved in the justice system. The CASAs support and advocate for youth that are navigating the juvenile probation system and aims to significantly reduce youth recidivism. While initial anecdotal evidence from the Juvenile Justice program is promising, VFC SD has not yet done a formal evaluation of the program.

VFC SD has an extremely close relationship with the dependency and juvenile courts in San Diego County. They are extremely well respected – literally, every single person that JV and SR encountered at the courthouse lit up when they were told that we were visiting with VFC. In general, San Diego County seems extremely progressive in its approach toward embracing new, evidence backed interventions and philosophies. They have given VFC an office inside the courthouse, the presiding judge serves on the National CASA Association's Judicial Leadership Council, and in early 2022, opened a detention facility that aims at rehabilitation and restorative justice for detained youth, rather than punishment. The facility looks more like a newly built college campus than a traditional juvenile detention center. The new center was praised by VFC.

JV feels that VFC SD and San Diego County more generally could become a national model for humane, empowering support for at-risk foster youth and youth within the juvenile justice system. JV also believes that VFC will be able to achieve its medium/long term goals of providing a CASA to every child who needs one and to serve as a trusted advocate for children in the juvenile court system with increased funding, if it is able to recruit, train, and retain significant numbers of new CASAs and maintain its positive relationship with the court. VFC should ramp up its efforts to diversify its CASA volunteers – a vast majority of CASAs are English-speaking, white women. VFC is acutely aware of this challenge and is in the process of implementing several initiatives aimed at increasing the number of people of color, male, LGBTQ, and bilingual people who serve as CASAs.



Fundraising Updates

VFC SD concluded their annual campaign on June 30th, 2022, exceeding fundraising goals by \$60,492. 27 donors supported FP/VFC SD's matching campaign, including seven new donors and four donors that significantly increased their donations from previous years. Donations ranged from \$2,500 - \$100,000. VFC SD's FY 2022-2023 budget is the largest in the organization's history - \$6.4 million. VFC SD staff are confident that they will successfully fundraise the full budget through a mix of government (county, state, national) funding, corporate donations, special events, and individual donations.

Focusing Philanthropy has partnered with VFC SD since 2016:

Year	FP Side of Match	VFC SD Side of Match	Total Campaign Amount
2016	\$50,000	\$100,000	\$150,000
2017	\$100,000	\$200,000	\$300,000
2018	\$100,000	\$200,000	\$300,000
2019	\$100,000	\$200,000	\$300,000
2020	\$150,000	\$300,000	\$450,000
2021	\$200,000	\$400,000	\$600,000
2022	\$250,000	\$500,000	\$750,000
Total Funds Deployed			\$2,850,000

Strategic Plan

VFC SD completed an ambitious strategic plan that was approved by their board of directors in June 2021 and remains committed to the focus areas and priorities identified in the plan:

- Invest in children through exceptional advocacy
- Value and invest in CASAs and staff
- Inspire and mobilize communities across the region
- Align resources to drive impact and sustainability

Discussion about VFC San Diego's financial picture and strategic plan

- VFC SD exceeded their match goal by \$60,492, which was more than they had initially communicated about. VCF staff state that their donors view matching campaigns positively and "we had a hard time stopping last minute donations from rolling in". VFC asked if FP might be able to match the additional amount they raised (see follow ups and next steps for more details).
- VFC SD's FY 2022-2023 annual budget is the largest in its history - \$6.4 million. VCF fundraising staff is confident that they will be able to raise the full amount by the end of the fiscal year. A significant portion of the budget increase will go towards increasing staff salaries, so all staff are paid a living wage. This was a commitment as part of VFC's board-approved strategic plan.
- VFC's FY 2020-2021 audit outcomes were clean, and the auditors did not include any recommendations or a management letter.
- In 2021, VFC SD developed its first strategic plan, in consultation with over 30 stakeholders. The plan was approved by VFC's board of directors in June 2021, and it is now serving as a guiding document for the organization.



- CASA California was allocated \$60,000,000 as part of the state budget. CASA California and county-level affiliates will soon begin the process of deciding how this money should be allocated. VFC SD anticipates that they will be allocated \$1-2 million from this pot of money.

Discussion with Kelly Wilkinson, current CASA volunteer

- JV and SR listened to a short presentation from Kelly Wilkinson, who currently serves as a CASA. Kelly started volunteering as a CASA nearly 8 years ago, shortly after she completed graduate school. She is now advocating for her second foster youth.
- Kelly very articulately described why she is passionate about being a CASA and praised the training and support she has gotten from VFC SD. She regularly participates in on-going training, and she is seen as a leader among CASAs. She stated that she will continue volunteering as a CASA for as long as she can.

Discussion with Vanessa, former foster youth served by a CASA

- Vanessa (last name withheld for privacy) is an incredibly inspiring young woman that was paired with a CASA for more than eight years.
- Vanessa entered the foster care system when she was eight years old, and later matched with a CASA when she was 11. When she entered the foster care system, she was placed in different foster care placements and group homes from her brother. She said this was the worst thing about her family being separated – she and her brother were best friends and “all we had was each other”.
- Shortly after being matched with a CASA, the CASA made sure that she was able to see her brother on a weekly basis. Vanessa said this made a major difference in her mental health. The CASA was also able to support her to be placed with a family for the long term – and be placed closer to her brother so they could see each other more regularly.
- The CASA noticed Vanessa’s drive and motivation and encouraged her to think about applying for an elite college prep high school in La Jolla. The CASA took Vanessa to visit, then supported her through the application process – not doing it for her, but rather teaching her to do it herself. Vanessa was accepted to the school and received a full scholarship.
- Vanessa excelled in high school and even applied (and was accepted and got a full scholarship) to study abroad in Italy for a semester. She had never previously left the state of California.
- During her senior year of high school, Vanessa applied to UCLA mostly on her own, based on what she learned from her experience applying to high school. She was accepted and received a full scholarship.
- Vanessa is now a sophomore at UCLA, studying psychology. After she graduates, she wants to start a non-profit that provides mental health services to teenage girls within the foster care system.
- A video clip featuring Vanessa and her brother describing their life experiences and how they were helped by VFC and CASAs can be found [here](#).

Dependency Court Visit

- JV and SR accompanied Kelly and Megan to dependency court to visit the VFC SD office within the courthouse to meet with Honorable Judge Ana Espana, the presiding judge and a supporter of the CASA model for more than 30 years.



- It quickly became obvious that VFC is incredibly well respected by literally everyone at the courthouse. When Kelly informed the sheriff that we were there with VFC during security checks at the entrance to the courthouse, he was immediately at ease, thanked VFC for the work that they do, and waived us through security without being thoroughly checked. This warm response repeated itself with at least five people that we encountered – from bailiffs, to sheriffs, to other judges.
- JV and SR spent a short time speaking with several advocacy supervisors working out of VFC's office in the courthouse. VFC is in the process of converting most of the office space into a resource center for children and youth waiting for their court hearings. They will have information about social services, health (physical and mental) services, educational resources, computers with internet, and lots of snacks!
- The group then visited with the presiding judge at the courthouse, Honorable Judge Ana Espana. The judge spoke highly of VFC and the CASA model. She stated that it would be close to impossible to effectively do her job without CASAs and that VFC had made a profound difference in the lives of thousands of kids. She also said it is her mission to make sure that CASAs are available for any child/youth that needs one. Earlier this year, the judge was appointed to the National CASA Association's Judicial Leadership Council. The judge is a huge supporter and champion of VFC and the CASA model more generally.

Key Observations

- VFC is carrying out truly impactful work at a decent scale in San Diego County.
- Adapting the CASA model to provide support to youth in the juvenile justice system seems promising and FP should follow VFC's efforts and emerging research/evidence to determine whether it might become a proven intervention we could help scale up in the coming years.
- VFC's CASA volunteer pool is not very diverse and is nearly 75% white women. They realize this is an issue, but FP should monitor their Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts moving forward.
- JV believes that VFC has the capacity to provide a CASA to every child that needs one in the county – VFC is well managed, well organized, visionary, and has excellent leadership. FP should work closely with VFC to determine what it would take to meet this goal in the coming years and work with VFC to make it happen.

Next Steps

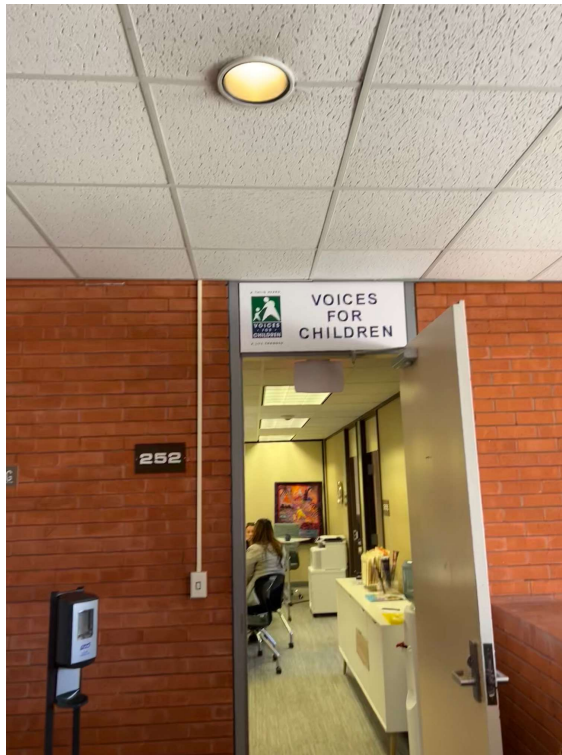
- Continue discussions about what it would take for VFC SD to provide a CASA to any child that needs one in San Diego County.
- In the coming months, plan for 2023 campaign.
- Follow up on the Juvenile Justice program, its impacts, and plans for formal evaluation.
- Think about potential synergies and learning opportunities between the three CASA organizations that FP supports.



Photos:



Vanessa, a former foster youth who was supported by a CASA for more than eight years, graduating from a prestigious college prep high school in La Jolla.



Voices for Children's office and resource center at the courthouse.