



Programs Visited

- CASA Los Angeles, August 3
- Voices for Children San Diego, August 30
- Voices for Children Riverside, September 15

CASA LA Staff & Participants

- CASA Los Angeles
 - CEO Charity Chandler-Cole
 - Marie Carpenter, Chief Development Officer
 - Kim Goldman, Director of Development
- Voices for Children San Diego
 - CEO Jessica Munoz
 - Chief Program Officer Stephen Moore
 - Chief Philanthropy Officer Rebecca Radar
 - Director of Philanthropy Christina Piranio
 - Judge Espana
- Voices for Children Riverside
 - Executive Director Brianna Miller
 - Program Director Sharon Morris
 - Chief Philanthropy Officer Rebecca Radar
 - Children's Attorney Laurie Burns

Focusing Philanthropy Staff

- Teresa Burton

Executive Summary

Focusing Philanthropy partners with and supports the three Southern California CASA organizations serving the State's largest populations of foster youth: Los Angeles, San Diego, and Riverside Counties. Funds from each campaign are used to recruit, train, and retain volunteers to provide one-on-one advocacy and reports to the court for each of the county's most vulnerable children as well as provide additional full-time paid supervisors.

CASA Background Information

CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate) organizations recruit, train, and support qualified citizen volunteers who are then assigned to a foster child's case by a Dependency Court judge. These CASAs help restore safety and stability in the lives of foster youth by advocating for their best interests in court, school, and the community.

Key Observations CASA Los Angeles

Teresa Burton and Pedro Kuroiwa of Focusing Philanthropy visited the CASA LA office at the courthouse in Monterey Park to meet with CASA LA CEO Charity Chandler-Cole and Chief Development Officer Marie Carpenter. We also briefly met Kim Goldman, the new Director of Development.

CASA served 1300 children in June 2023 and set a goal to serve between 1400 and 1500 by June 2024. To meet their goal, CASA is relaunching a marketing campaign to recruit new volunteers using billboards, social media, digital ads, and radio. In addition, four staff members have joined the outreach team, making the total staff 70 people.

Charity reported that CASA has plans to buy a property in the Antelope Valley, the location of a large proportion of foster kids in LA County. The building would serve as a training location, meeting point for CASAs and children, shared nonprofit office space and a play yard, and possibly, a hub for community gatherings.

The process to create a new strategic plan is underway and will be complete by the end of the year. Consultants from Third Plateau are in the process of meeting with stakeholders. The plan would cover three years with an emphasis on making a deeper impact on the lives of children served and less of an emphasis on how many children are served.

CASA LA has continued efforts to collaborate with other nonprofits in the same line of work. Butterfly Haven (housing for parenting youth) is expanding to a third property and is purchasing another property that will become a childcare facility. USC is giving social work students credit for attending training and taking on Essential History case summaries. CASA is also engaged with a parenting coaching organization to provide coaching to parents of foster children. Hop, Skip, Drive is providing rides for foster children to court and other appointments using DCFS funds.

CASA has paused starting new training classes this fall to overhaul the curriculum. The changes will include addressing bias, serving a diverse volunteer base, and working with individuals expressing biases so that there are fewer dismissals. CASA will also offer training opportunities to judges, social workers, and other stakeholders, including mandated reporters. After Charity took a training course herself in order to better understand the needs, she decided to create three new positions: a Director of Volunteer Relations, a manager, and an interviewer. New training requirements for CASA volunteers are expected to be 30 hours of core training, 10 extra hours of training related to specific age groups of foster children, and the grouping of volunteers by cohorts so they can stay in touch and help each other with their cases. She noted that the ten hours of specialized training will be offered during the time volunteers are sworn in and before they are assigned a case so they can prepare for the type of case they are likely to receive.

Successful fundraising efforts have resulted in the annual budget growing to \$11 million in FY 2023-2024. One grant required that CASA create an endowment – the total stands at \$60,000 and is another area CASA LA would like to fundraise to increase. A new event called Women of City Hall raised \$100,000. A back to school event recently provided youth with school supplies, shoes, backpacks, and hair products.

Key Observations CASA Riverside

I visited the new office of CASA Riverside which now boasts 521 children served with 230 CASAs and 13 staff members, 9 of whom are Advocacy Supervisors. Future goals are to serve 540 children in 2024 and 600 children in 2025. CASA continues to have strong relationships with the bench, public defenders, and the local community. Public defenders asked for and supported the juvenile justice program launch, which now serves 35 dual-status children. Currently, court staff and CASA are working to make referrals for dual-status kids automatic. The Pechanga tribal approached CASA last year to adapt their model to serve children in tribal dependency court. CASA is building relationships with tribal leadership to meet



this need which is relatively small with only 12 removal cases. Tribal court proceedings are held on Zoom and serve several tribes over a large geographic, including several states.

Laurie Burns, a child's attorney on the independent panel in Riverside, attended the meeting to talk about her experiences with CASAs and why she requests CASAs for many of her cases. Burns currently has 180 cases covering 250 minors and relies on the information and insights in CASA reports. Given her large caseload, she rarely has time to speak with her clients at length. Most of her interactions with children occur in court hallways or by phone, never at home, and never for very long. Many of her clients need an adult to hold their education rights, giving them the ability to attend school meetings and IEPs, and CASAs do a much better job than district surrogates. She reported that CASAs also play an important role in conducting home visits checking on the care and medical needs of babies who were born with drugs in their system and are living in foster homes.

The annual budget of CASA Riverside is \$1.5 million. Successful fundraising efforts have allowed an increase in the budget, the hiring of new staff, and a small surplus. Staff reported using the Focusing Philanthropy campaign as a tool for attracting new and recurring donors every year. This year they expect 10 returning donors and 7 new supporters will give to the matching campaign.

Case Story – In one of the toughest cases last year, experienced CASA volunteer Nancy was assigned to help a severely abused 11-year-old girl. Due to the duration of her abuse by her father, the girl was emotionally detached and unwilling to share or talk to new people. She was referred by her attorney, who asked that Nancy help uncover what the girl needed so they could properly advocate for her. Nancy started by writing the child a letter explaining her role and beginning their conversations in a quiet and non-threatening way. For 6 to 8 months, the girl did not respond to Nancy. Nancy continued to send letters and care packages and continued to advocate for services and a permanent placement for her. After a time, she allowed Nancy to visit her in person at her prospective adoptive home. A picture she painted for Nancy now hangs in all 3 Riverside offices as a reminder to celebrate the successes, in this case, the brave girl who testified against her father in court with her CASA there to support her.

Key Observations CASA San Diego

I visited the recently painted and refreshed courthouse office of Voices for Children (VFC) San Diego on August 30, 2023. The office is a comfortable space with snacks and toys where CASAs and minor's council can meet with children before or after a court hearing. Chief Program Officer Stephen Moore, supervised the changes and described the "attitude of gratitude" that VFC has made part of the culture for CASA volunteers. Next year, VFC will launch a digital portal that will be a welcome resource library for CASA volunteers, providing guidance on case management and listing local community resources that can address children's particular needs.

CEO Jessica Munoz reported she has been present that VFC is 2 years into a 3-year strategic plan. For the next plan, staff will update the goals and present a \$2 to \$3 million endowment plan to the Board, but will not create an entirely new strategic plan. Jessica and Stephen were happy to report that the recent addition of a CASA recruitment video in the three San Diego courthouse jury waiting rooms has been effective at raising awareness and volunteer interest. Additionally, CASA has held training sessions for county social workers (whose caseloads include 25 families each) explaining the role of CASAs and how



they can work alongside social workers. Social workers have expressed surprise that CASAs are volunteers that don't get paid for the help they provide.

Judge Espana, presiding judge of the Dependency Court, attended part of our meeting and talked about the improvement she has helped make a reality – the dual-status program and the jury recruitment video. She also serves on the National CASA Judicial Council, which hopes to engage judges from all 973 CASA programs nationwide. She's participated for the last three years to share the benefits of the San Diego County program, and it has led to her being a national advocate for making improvements to other CASA programs. Espana began her career as a children's attorney in 1983 and was later appointed to the bench in 2008. She has spent her career working to improve children's lives and was proud to report that the dual-status program has served over 300 children since 2018. She noted that the program has resulted in juvenile court judges only hearing cases involving violent offenses now, no minor offenses, and no long-term system involvement for foster children accused of minor offenses. In September, Judge Espana will be part of a new program of virtual town halls that will hold discussions aimed at demystifying the child welfare system. Topics for future town halls are program innovations in child welfare and funding for prevention efforts.

Success in fundraising and the state funding made possible by the California CASA Association's lobbying efforts over the last few years has allowed VFC to offer a 403b retirement plan with a 3% employer match and to raise the base salary of Advocacy Supervisors for the first time in many years and in line with increases with the cost of living in San Diego. The San Diego board has 27 members, just added their first board member from Riverside County, and reports 100% annual giving.

I met CASA volunteer Jose, a retired Marine who heard about CASA on the radio and has since been a volunteer advocate for 5 children. He is currently advocating for a 20-year-old young man who is struggling to read and can't find a job or get a military post as a result. Jose helped him get a reading tutor so he can hopefully, move on to passing the written test for a driver's license, get a GED, and possibly take the military test again. He cited the primary challenge as creating a rapport with young people, which is easier with those under 13 years old. A typical outing for Jose is a breakfast, a hike, playing basketball, or just sitting and talking. Jose said volunteering is not very time-consuming and that he gets more out of it than he puts in because judges are friendly and grateful for his reports, and his reports are easy to write but highly influential. Jose has enjoyed his service so much that he urged a niece to volunteer. She is now working with a 13-year-old girl. He stays in touch with some of the people in his previous cases because some families want to keep in contact and others don't.

With regard to measurement and evaluation, Jessica mentioned that she is participating in the CA CASA Association committee assigned to creating databases reporting outcomes statewide. VFC is currently evaluating the case liaison process to record the range of needs they address, how to capture all the ways they are helpful to youth, what works, what to continue or discontinue doing, and where to improve.

Case Story – Director of Philanthropy Christina Piranio, described another situation in which a CASA goes above and beyond to help a child. Just this week an attorney reached out to VFC to express gratitude that a CASA sat at the bedside of a minor who had emergency surgery for more than 20 hours because no one else was able to be there.



Case story – In another case, a CASA volunteer recently stepped in when a young girl with mental health challenges was told she was being expelled from a group home. Her CASA helped her stay in the group home by simply asking why, and what the girl could do to stay. Since then, she has been doing better and will be able to stay in the same home and school.

