



Focusing Philanthropy

Voices For Children (CASA/San Diego and Riverside) Diligence Trip Report San Diego, California August 14, 2025

Focusing Philanthropy Staff

- Bessie Saldana
- Pedro Kuroiwa

Voices For Children Staff

- Jessica Muñoz, CEO
- Rebecca Rader, Chief Philanthropy Officer
- Stephen Moore, Chief Program Officer, San Diego

Juvenile Court – Meadow Lark Courthouse

- Judge Daniela Reali-Ferrari

Executive Summary

Focusing Philanthropy conducted a due diligence visit to Voices for Children (VFC), which provides CASA services in San Diego and Riverside counties. VFC organizes and supports community volunteers to advocate for foster youth and system-involved children. Discussions focused on program reach, volunteer recruitment, financial sustainability, cost per child, evaluation methods, and judicial perspectives on CASA impact. Judge Reali-Ferrari strongly emphasized the invaluable role CASAs play in ensuring children’s best interests are represented in court.

Background

VFC recruits, trains, and supervises CASA volunteers who provide individualized advocacy for children in foster care. Their staff also directly serve children, when necessary, particularly in complex or high-need cases. In addition to San Diego operations, VFC extends services to Riverside County.

Key Observations

Determination of CASA Assignment in San Diego

San Diego currently achieves 100% coverage of cases in the child welfare system and when determining whether a dependent child should receive the services of a CASA, a staff advocate, or have their case monitored, VFC considers many factors including but not limited to the following:

- Placement stability
- Mental and physical health
- Developmental and behavioral needs / concerns
- Unmet educational needs or academic concerns
- Family connections and social support



When evaluating all these areas, their staff administers an assessment tool that specifically evaluates if these above domains are no concerns, stable, at risk or in crises. These factors, among others help them to determine the most appropriate service provision for their youth, while also considering referrals from the Court, court professionals, social services, family, or the youth specifically.

VFC mentioned that they are seeing more serious and challenging cases, which involve abuse and torture.

Cases in Riverside are referrals by the Judge.

Children Entering & Exiting Care in San Diego

Each year can look very different, but Voices for Children closely tracks children entering care on a weekly, bi-weekly, monthly and annual basis. Over the last two years, approximately 700 children entered care in San Diego. Over the same two years, approximately 800 children exited care in either reunification, adoption, guardianship, or aged out of foster care.

Children Served & Waitlist

- San Diego has only a small waiting list of children needing assignment. Most children are matched after volunteer training (approx. 6 weeks). The FFPSA (Family First Prevention Services Act) law, along with the expedited reunification and adoption cases in San Diego, has resulted in the county not seeing a significant increase in the number of children in the system.
- Riverside faces greater challenges in serving all children due to resource and recruitment constraints. Jessica noted that in Riverside, additional resources directly translate into more children being served. She also highlighted that Riverside's rapidly growing population further increases demand for services.
- The number of children served by the traveling advocate has increased to 25-35.

Cost per Child

Historically, the cost per child was calculated at \$2,500 in San Diego and \$2,000 in Riverside, excluding administrative and fundraising expenses. These figures were used in past campaigns to demonstrate impact; however, VFC clarified that these numbers are outdated. We requested updated figures that more accurately reflect current costs.

Volunteer Recruitment & Retention

Main obstacles continue to be resources and recruitment.

- VFC continues to prioritize volunteer recruitment campaigns.
- San Diego matches children within weeks of training, showing effective retention and placement.
- In San Diego, most of CASAs stop volunteering because they move out of the county.
- Riverside faces greater recruitment challenges but is making progress.

Staff & Board Updates

- No major staff changes; Board continues normal rotation every 2–3 years.

Program Measurement & Evaluation

- VFC is engaged with the CAL CASA study for statewide evaluation.
- Impact is measured through volunteer reports, staff oversight, and case outcome tracking.

Other Updates

- The Pechanga Tribe partnership supports 12 children, with services renewed in January.
- California budget deficit remains a concern; contingency planning is in place should government support decline.
- It has been confirmed that campaign funds are used to finance program staff.

Judicial Perspective (Judge Daniela Reali-Ferrari)

Judge Reali-Ferrari provided strong testimony regarding the value of CASA volunteers:

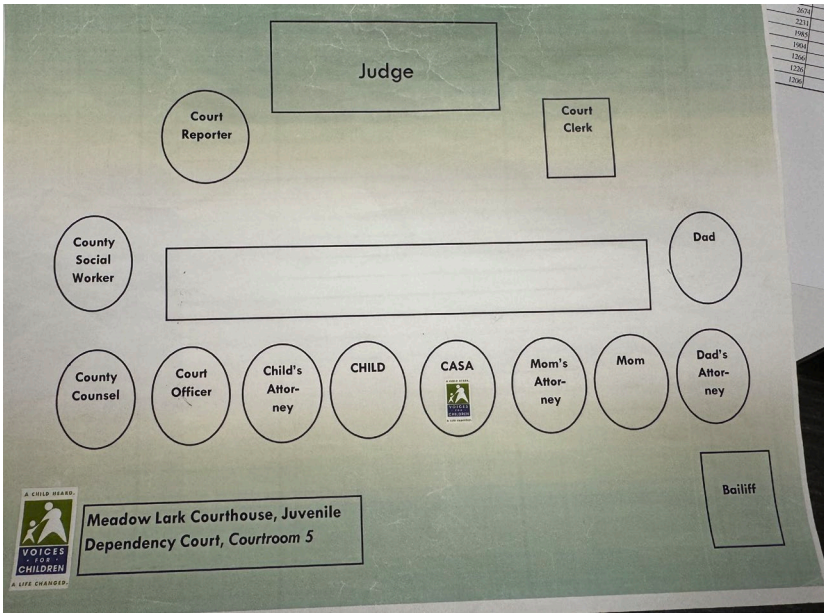
- CASA reports are detailed and insightful, often containing more critical information than social workers can provide.
- She emphasized that CASAs profoundly impact case decisions, timelines, and overall child welfare outcomes.
- CASA volunteers are well-prepared, knowledgeable about court procedures, and responsive to judicial requests.
- 85% of her cases are assigned either a CASA or case liaison.
- She confirmed the court’s priority is family reunification, with removal decisions made only when necessary.
- Her caseload averages 7 cases per day, with afternoons reserved for contested cases.

Organizational Priorities Going Forward

- Update cost per child methodology for greater accuracy in budgeting and fundraising.
- Expand volunteer recruitment efforts, particularly at Riverside.
- Monitor the California state budget for potential impacts on funding stability.



Voices for Children office inside the courthouse.



Seating map of all participants in the courtroom. Note: the CASA volunteer is seated next to the child.