

# Sample Documents



**TEXASCASA**  
Court Appointed Special Advocates  
FOR CHILDREN

Sample Documents



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## SAMPLE COURT REPORT INSTRUCTIONS

Each CASA program may have their own unique court report template and detailed instructions for writing reports to the court. Refer to your program's guidance so that your report is tailored exactly to the standards of your local court.

The CASA volunteer court report is the most essential aspect of your work. The report outlines what you discover, your assessment of the child's situation, and what the court needs to do to help the child achieve a safe, permanent home. It is your primary tool in communicating the child's perspective. The court report is the vehicle through which you present your recommendations about what services will meet the child's needs.

The facts stated throughout the report are the foundation of your recommendations and should be clear, concise, and easily distinguished from opinions and assumption. When writing the document, it is imperative to respect all the individuals involved in the case. A report written from an honest and objective view can eliminate defensive attitudes and ease implementation of the recommendations.

You will have greater success defending your written documentation and representing the best interests of the child if the report is free from bias.

Judges rely on the information in CASA volunteer court reports as they make their decisions. You will submit reports for most hearings. The report provides a way to systematically organize pertinent information and give the court a clear mental image of the child's situation. Most of the information the court receives is derived from your written documentation, which becomes part of the record at each court hearing. CASA volunteer court reports are shared with all parties to a case and any other individuals who are authorized by law to receive them. They will be a part of the legal case record.

All CASA programs require that court reports be submitted to the CASA program office prior to court. Staff will review all CASA volunteer court reports to ensure the recommendations are supported by facts and all relevant information and documentation has been included. Staff may make suggestions about wording or edits to make your report clearer.

The main components of the CASA volunteer court report are as follows:

- **Child(ren)/Situation**—This will typically be completed by your supervisor.
- **Permanency Plan**—This will typically be completed by your supervisor and will state the current plan, along with whether or not CASA agrees with it. If not in agreement, CASA's recommended plan will also be included.

- **Summary of Contacts**—This is where you take over writing the court report and list all contacts made since the last hearing date.
- **Case Summary**—This is the narrative section, where you provide a summary of the updates, strengths, and needs of each child and parent on the case. This section should support the rest of the document and include all needed information on the case.
- **Areas of Concern**—This is where you highlight and summarize concerns, which have already been explained in the Case Summary, to ensure they are addressed by the judge.
- **Recommendations**—This is where you list what you would like to have ordered by the judge. Every recognized Area of Concern from the previous section should be answered by a Recommendation in this section.

## Writing Effective Recommendations

Your recommendations to the court regarding the best interest of the child(ren) are the result of your work on a case up to that point and the culmination of your volunteer court report. When you make a written recommendation, you are asking the court to make an order. The judge will decide whether or not to order the recommendations listed. As with everything in the court report, your recommendations should be written clearly and concisely.

Consider the following areas of concern when you write your recommendations:

- Custody of child and child’s physical placement (always the first recommendation in your listing)
- The child’s attachment needs
- The child’s need for normalcy
- Counseling (individual or family; remember to be specific if trauma-informed therapy is needed)
- Parental visitation (supervised or unsupervised)
- Sibling visitations (if siblings are in a different placement)
- Random drug screening at the request of the caseworker
- Substance abuse assessments
- Diagnostic assessments (including following all recommendations thereof)
- Services for parents (these should be directly related to any concerns about parents’ ability to meet the MSL for the child or children)
- Educational needs
- Community resources
- Any other need (language, transportation, scheduling of services, etc.)

## Recommendations Should Cover All of the Child's Needs

Perhaps it seems obvious to say that the recommendations should cover the child's needs, but consider the following questions:

- What if the child has a need that has not been met over multiple hearings? Do you still ask for it?
- What if the child has a need that the county doesn't provide services for? Do you still ask for it?
- If the child's needs are great in one area, for instance mental health, should the child's educational needs still be listed, even though the mental health needs must be addressed before the educational needs can be attended to?
- If the child is placed with extended family members who can't meet some of their needs, do you still press for all needs to be met even though it may cause the child to be moved?

For these or other challenges in getting a child's needs covered, consult with your CASA supervisor to strategize the best solution.

## Recommendations Should Not Set Parents Up for Failure

One of the central dilemmas for CASA volunteers is the fact that children do best when they live with their parents or other family members who can provide a minimum sufficient level of care, and yet the parenting abilities of these adults may seem marginal to the volunteer. Parents and caregivers in our cases might be struggling or limited in significant ways. CASA volunteers must advocate for the child's safety and, at the same time, keep in mind that the only standard a family should have to meet is the minimum sufficient level of care.

Poverty in and of itself should not be a factor when deciding if a family will be allowed to raise its own children. It is easy to set parents or guardians up for failure if we make recommendations they cannot afford to meet. Additionally, a long laundry list of court orders can be so discouraging that a parent who could in fact succeed may give up. If that occurs, how have we served the child's best interests?

Consider these questions:

- What other ways might we set a parent up for failure?
- How have we fallen short in our advocacy for the child's best interest if we do set the parents up for failure? (Who else is failing here?)
- How can we set a parent up for success?

## All Recommendations Should Be Supported in the Case Summary

Imagine you are the judge reading a CASA volunteer court report and you come across recommendations concerning issues that were not mentioned in the Case Summary. What would you think?

- Why is it important to support each recommendation in the Case Summary?
- How does writing a recommendation to address an issue not discussed in the report put that recommendation at risk?
- If the case is appealed and all reports in the file are read again, what are the implications for court reports that don't support their own recommendations?

## Recommendations Should Include Outcome Measures

Outcome measures add specific parameters that define a successful execution of the recommendation. They clarify the expected outcome and set observable goals.

As you look at the chart that follows, consider these questions:

- How will you know if the court-ordered recommendations in the “without outcome measures” column have been met?
- In which case are you more assured that the children's needs will be met?

Recommendations WITHOUT Outcome Measures	Recommendations WITH Outcome Measures
Mother must have substance abuse evaluation and follow recommendations from same.	Mother must have substance abuse evaluation, follow recommendations from same and remain actively engaged in recovery work for 3 months before court considers reunification.
Child should have visitation with siblings.	Child should have visitation with siblings set up bi-weekly and supervised by an approved visit supervisor, preferably a relative.

## Important Tips for Writing Your Court Report

### Respect Deadlines

- Turn your court reports in on time—typically two to four weeks before your hearing date, and to the deadline specifically decided upon by your supervisor. Court reports must be turned into the court a week before the hearing date, and there is a multi-step staff review process once a volunteer turns in a report.

### Content and Recommendations

- The report should be child-centered. Stay focused on the child(ren) and how circumstances or issues are affecting them.
- Look for solutions, not problems.
- Eliminate negative emotions, subjective phrases, personal bias and judgments.
- Let the court know when something that was supposed to happen has slipped through the cracks.
- Be creative and courageous. Feel free to think outside the box, but back up your recommendations with facts and observations, not opinions.
- Your recommendations should include outcome measures and be time-sensitive and as specific as possible so they may be turned into official court orders. (e.g., CASA recommends evaluation be scheduled within 14 days.)
- Do not assume the reader knows what you know. Give all needed information.
- Reports should generally only include information gathered since the last hearing, unless some background information is necessary.

### Writing

- Keep your court report brief. Reports should be between 3 and 5 pages in length.
- When reporting information, be sure to identify the source and date of the information as specifically as possible.
- Do not transcribe information from other reports directly into your report. Paraphrase information using your own words.
- Do not include quotations from attorneys.

### Formatting

- Always refer to yourself and your supervisor as “CASA” as opposed to “I” or “your supervisor’s name.” This way CASA always speaks with one voice and you do not need to differentiate between who did what. (e.g., CASA recommends . . ., CASA is concerned . . ., It is CASA’s understanding . . .)
- Use bold text to highlight important information in the court report.



- Use italics as subheadings in the Summary section when there is a lot of information on a specific topic.
- Write out dates (January 1, 2016) except for the children’s birthdays (which should be MM/DD/YY).
- Refer to the parents by their full names, as Ms./Mrs./Mr. [Last Name] or as the “mother” or “father.” Do not refer to the parents by only their first name or as “mom” or “dad.” Refer to everyone else by their role. (e.g., The foster parents, Johnny’s teacher, the DFPS caseworker . . .)
- Define acronyms the first time you use them. (e.g., “Family Team Meeting (FTM)” can be followed by “During the FTM . . .”)
- Be consistent with titles. Pick a title and stick to it throughout your report.

## Reviewing Your Report

- Remember to spellcheck and proofread, both for typos and the facts of the case. Check children’s ages, birthdays, name spelling, updated placement, etc.
- As you review your court report, ensure that the Case Summary, Areas of Concern, and Recommendations all reflect and support each other. There should not be new information, concerns, or recommendations that show up at the end without having been first addressed during the Case Summary. Every recognized Area of Concern should be answered by a Recommendation.
- Scrutinize your report as the parties’ attorneys will; do not leave room for unanswered questions.

## Confidentiality

- Keep in mind that court reports are public documents. In order to protect the confidentiality of the children we serve, do not include information on the following:
  - Placements and addresses: The names of foster homes, shelters, residential treatment centers (RTCs), or group homes should never be used, which is why we only state type and distance. The only exception to this rule is if the child is placed with a parent or relative since the parents are aware of the location of the children. When sharing where parents live, mention only the city and do not include parents’ street address.
  - Serious behavioral issues (sexual, violent, etc.) or juvenile court involvement: You may allude to these issues and then say they will be discussed verbally with the judge. (e.g., “Tommy and Sarah are placed separately due to allegations of inappropriate behavior that will be further discussed in court.” -or- “Tommy is placed in a secure facility. CASA will further discuss his legal issues at the hearing.”)

## Court Report Template and Instructional

### CASA OF WILDFLOWER COUNTY

100 Best Interest Dr  
Bluebonnet, Texas 75022  
(555) 555-5555 FAX (555) 555-5555

**Cause No. D-1-FM-18-123456**  
**Initial Permanency Hearing**

**IN THE INTEREST OF:**

**MARIAH REDD**

**CHILD**

**DATE OF HEARING: JULY 29, 2018**

**CHILD/SITUATION**

**IN THE DISTRICT COURT OF  
WILDFLOWER COUNTY, TEXAS**

**126TH JUDICIAL DISTRICT**

**Mariah Redd**

**DOB: 2/1/2018**

**5 months old**

Mariah Redd is currently living in a foster home in Bluebonnet, TX, where she was placed on February 6, 2018.

The Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) was granted Temporary Managing Conservatorship (TMC) of Mariah Redd on March 18, 2018. Case was initiated due to the child, Mariah Redd, testing positive for the drug Phencyclidine (PCP) at birth. The dismissal date for this case is March 20, 2019.

### PERMANENCY PLAN

The current DFPS Permanency Plan is Family Reunification, with a concurrent plan of Relative Adoption. CASA is in agreement with this plan.

### SUMMARY OF CONTACTS SINCE LAST REVIEW

#### ▶ Instructions for Summary of Contacts

This is where you as the CASA volunteer take over writing the court report. Write this section as a bullet-pointed list of all the people you have contacted since the last hearing.

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- Use “CASA” instead of “I”.
- Mention your contact with the child first, then: DFPS caseworker; attorney ad litem; child’s therapist; teacher, school counselor, daycare teacher; foster parents, caregivers, facility staff; Foster Licensing Agency Case Manager; pediatrician; parents; parents’ attorneys; parents’ service providers (if you have a signed Release of Info).
- Include people whom you have attempted to contact (with dates) even if you have not reached them. These should be documented in your case notes as well.
- Do not include names beyond children, parents, and relatives. Refer to all other contacts by their titles so that the judge can keep this information straight (DFPS caseworker, the foster parents, the child’s science teacher, etc.).
- Include important meetings you have attended—PC, ISP, FGC, etc. —and include dates if possible.

## CASE SUMMARY SINCE LAST REVIEW

“Mariah Redd (5 months old) is...”

### ▶ Instructions for Case Summary: Children

This is the narrative section where you provide a summary of the updates, strengths and needs of each child, and parent on the case, beginning with the oldest child. This is your chance to tell the judge who the children are, how they are doing, what services they are receiving, what progress has been made, what their unmet needs are, and what needs to happen for them to be able to return home safely. You do not need to include details of the original allegations of abuse or neglect.

Anything you identify as an Area of Concern in the next section, for which you subsequently present a Recommendation as an answer, should be supported in the Case Summary section. Someone reading the report should not be learning anything new about the case in Areas of Concern or Recommendations.

***An Important Note on Confidentiality:*** Court reports are public documents. To protect the confidentiality of the children we serve, do not include information on serious behavioral issues (sexual, violence, etc.) or on juvenile court involvement in your report. You may allude to these issues and note that they will be discussed verbally.

### Writing/Formatting:

Write in paragraph form. Use bold to highlight important information. If a topic has a lot of content, use a subheading in italics to organize.

Start with the child's name, age, current placement, their behavior within that placement, and a short description of who the child is. Share something positive in this paragraph to personify the child for the judge.

Focus on the following areas:

- How is the child doing in their placement, at school, medically, psychologically, developmentally, etc.?
- What services are they receiving?
- What progress has been made?
- Have any successes occurred?
- What is going well? What is not going well?
- What is the plan to fix any issues?
- Does the child have unmet needs? Is there a plan to meet those needs?
- How are the child's cultural needs (if any) being met?
- Is a court order necessary to get needs met, or is a resolution being worked on outside the courtroom?

### Educational Updates:

- Do not mention the name of the child's school.
- State whether the child is receiving regular or special education services. If special ed., give the qualifying designation: ED—Emotionally Disturbed, LD—Learning Disabled, OHI—Other Health Impairment, or 504.
- Include the date of the last or upcoming ARD meeting.
- Discuss the child's behavior in school, including their grades, academic progress, attendance and when CASA reviewed the educational passport.
- Share if the child is in any extracurricular activities, and if so, how they are going.

### Health/Development Updates:

- Are there any particular health issues or developmental concerns?
- Is the child on any medications? If so, what is the name and dosage of the

medication? What diagnosis is the medication prescribed to treat? Is the child experiencing any side effects?

- Is the child up-to-date on vaccines and well-child checks?
- Has the child had developmental assessments (ECI or psychological)? What were the results and recommendations?
- Does CASA believe the child would benefit from additional assessments or services? If so, which ones?
- Is the child receiving previously recommended services? If not, why?

### Therapeutic/Psychological Updates:

- What frequency and type of therapy is the child receiving: individual, group, play, occupational, etc?
- What general issues are being worked on in therapy, and what, if any, progress has the therapist reported? Share notes and comments from the therapist.
- What, if any, mental health diagnoses does the child have, and what is the plan to treat these diagnoses?
- Diagnoses and Medications (if applicable): Be sure to check spelling of medications and include dosages, who dispenses each med, frequency, why it is being used and how it is helping (get info from child, caregiver, teacher, etc). What, if any, side effects is the child experiencing?
- You do not need to include detailed information from the child's psychological evaluation, such as types of tests that were completed. Simply list the diagnosis and the recommendations from the psychologist.

### Additional Topics:

If you have another topic you need to discuss, add another paragraph. Make sure to mention any special recognition the child has received or any pertinent information not covered above.

### Next Child:

Once you have completed the oldest child's section of the report, continue on with a separate section for the next oldest child and so on until each child has their own section. Even when children have similar information, **each child must have their own section with their own individual information.**

## Information Applying to All Siblings:

If you have information that applies to all children identically, such as Family Visitation Updates, create a subheading in italics after all the children's individual reports to share only once.

## Family Visitation Updates:

- Report on sibling and parental visits. Where are they taking place? Are the visits supervised or unsupervised and by whom? What is the frequency of visitation?
- How are the visits going? What observations has CASA made about the visits?
- What strengths does CASA see during the visits?
- What concerns does CASA have about the visits? Share recommendations to address these concerns.
- Is CASA requesting any changes with the current visitation schedule?

"Clarissa Redd (mother)..."

"Johnny Smith (father)..."

### ▶ Instructions for Case Summary: Parents

Upon completing a section for each child, do the same for each parent. **Every parent must have their own paragraph, including missing, deceased, and incarcerated parents, and alleged fathers whose paternity is yet to be verified.** With multiple fathers, list (father of child-name) next to each person's name in summary. It is helpful to continue to include parents even if their parental rights were terminated.

Focus on the following areas:

- Start with the mother and her information, then the father(s) of the oldest to youngest child.
- Where does the parent live? (Do not include parents' street address, only city.)
- Are they employed? If so, full-time or part-time, and what is their position?
- Discuss any progress on the parents' service plans. Be sure to list which services are completed, which are in progress, and which services the parent has not started (make sure to state why services not are completed if it is not the parents' fault).

- Keep in mind that completion of services is not the only measure of a parent's ability to safely parent their children. As you prepare your report, consider the MSL for each child and ask yourself whether the child could safely return home today. If not, what are the specific concerns and/or barriers to reunification?
- What are the parent's strengths and skills?

### ▶ **Instructions for Case Summary: Other Family Members**

It is important to help build a supportive community around the parents as they work towards the goal of reunification. Once you have completed a section on each and every parent, you can add a section about any other significant relatives or fictive kin who are involved with the child. For example, you would include this section if the child is placed with a relative and there are issues that need to be addressed to support the relative, or if CASA located a relative and is advocating for placement of the child with that relative.

## **AREAS OF CONCERN**

### ▶ **Instructions for Areas of Concern**

In this section of the report, CASA highlights and summarizes concerns in bullet-point format **that have already been explained in the Case Summary section of the report.** For example, if CASA is concerned about Ronny's failing grade in math, then that should have been explained in the education section of the report and it will now be reiterated here. **Do not** mention a concern that does not have a corresponding explanation in the Case Summary.

**Make sure to list all concerns you hope to have addressed by the judge.** List concerns regarding the children first, followed by concerns regarding the parents.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### ▶ **Instructions for Recommendations**

This section is where you list what CASA would like to have ordered by the judge. Make sure that each recommendation is as specific as possible so that it can be more easily enforced. There should be only one recommendation per numbered line. Do not list

multiple recommendations for the same person, or multiple people's recommendations, in one sentence, even if the recommendation is the same for each person.

**Every recognized Area of Concern from the previous section should be answered by a Recommendation in this section.**

**Recommendations must be something that the court can legally order.** The judge has jurisdiction over DFPS, attorneys, parents, CASA, and the children, so these are the only people that can be ordered to do something.

Examples:

- The judge cannot order the school to provide math tutoring, but they can order DFPS to locate tutoring services for the child.
- A biological parent's partner cannot be legally ordered to do something on a DFPS case, but if they are willing to participate in services, then DFPS can be ordered to make said services available.



Based on the above summary and observations, CASA of Wildflower County, Inc. respectfully recommends:

1. That the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services maintain Temporary Managing Conservatorship of Mariah Redd;
  - ▶ **The first recommendation is always about the legal status of the case and only changes if that status changes.**
2. That the child's current placement be . . .
  - ▶ **The second recommendation is always about placement of the children. This recommendation only changes if CASA is requesting a change in placement.**
3. That . . .:
  - ▶ **The next recommendations can cover whatever specific orders CASA would like to see the judge make. Always start with orders relating to the oldest child first, then the next oldest, etc.**
4. That . . .; and
  - ▶ **After orders regarding the children, move to orders about the mother, then the father of the oldest child, etc. All recommendations must be for things that the judge can order and enforce. The judge cannot order a parent to learn better parenting skills. However, the judge can order the parent to participate in parenting classes.**
5. That the case be reviewed within three months.
  - ▶ **The last recommendation is always about when CASA would like for the case to be reviewed. Most cases are reviewed every 3–4 months, but CASA can request an earlier review. If there are issues on the case that need a quick resolution, it may be appropriate to suggest an earlier review if you feel there's a need for additional accountability. This will help ensure that difficult problems are resolved sooner.**

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*Your Name*  
CASA Volunteer

---

Date

---

*Your CASA Supervisor's Name*  
CASA Supervisor

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Date

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*Your CASA Program Director's Name*  
CASA Program Director

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Date

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### **Troubleshooting Issues**

Reach out to your supervisor if you have any questions or issues using Optima.

### **Frequently Asked Questions**

#### **What is Optima?**

Optima is a database for CASA programs. It contains confidential information about children, volunteers, and cases.

#### **How does Optima work?**

Optima is web-based. You can access it via a web browser and with a password.

#### **Why use Optima?**

Optima allows you and your supervisor to create and maintain a shared set of information about children and cases. Optima also allows us to track our service, coordinate our efforts, and report on our actions to funders and other stakeholders. When you use Optima, we are better organized, more accountable, and able to devote more time and resources to helping children. It is important to remember that because our entire advocacy is documented in Optima, you must be mindful about what information goes into Optima, as all Optima records can potentially be subpoenaed.

#### **Can I use Optima from my mobile phone or tablet?**

Yes. Optima works with Explorer, Chrome, Firefox, Safari, and Opera.

When you use your mobile phone to login, you will be directed to Optima Go, the mobile tool, which allows you to add quick notes and contact logs, as well as view hearing details, documents, see week-at-a-glance events and add calendar events.

#### **What training and support is available?**

The basics of using Optima are taught throughout the CASA volunteer training program. At your initial case sign-up, talk with your supervisor about any questions you have regarding monthly mandatory inputting of information into Optima and other logistics to manage your case. You will use this how-to guide to continue to familiarize yourself with Optima. Your supervisor will continue to be a support and help you learn to navigate the database.

## What if I forget my password?

Use the blue Forgot Password link on the log-in screen. The email address associated with your Optima account should be the same email used on your volunteer application, unless you changed this prior to completing training. If you do not receive the email message with the link to reset your password, contact your supervisor for assistance with logging in.

## What fields are mandatory?

✪ This represents a section with mandatory fields. Be sure to read entire section details to ensure you're entering all data. Update all mandatory fields as you learn of new information, within the same week.

## Volunteer Dashboard

### Your Profile

Once you're logged in, you'll be at the Volunteer Dashboard page—this is your main page. From here you can navigate to other tabs and sections. You get back to the main page by clicking on the Volunteer Dashboard icon.

### ✪ Personal Information

From the Volunteer Dashboard, click the Personal Info button to update:

- Contact Information (Demographics section)
- Emergency Contacts
- Employment
- Case Preferences (About Tab)

Click on the green Edit and Add buttons to update Personal Info sections listed above. Be sure to click the green Save button when you're done. You can edit an existing entry by clicking on the green Edit button or clicking on the Pen and Paper icon. You can delete entries by using the red X button in the Action column.

### Address Book

The Address Book is linked to you, which means you will have access to this throughout any case you're assigned while you're an active volunteer. Use the Address Book as a community resource guide, not for case-specific information. Click on the blue Address Book button on the Volunteer Dashboard page. Click on the green Add button to create a new entry or the Pen and Paper icon to edit an existing entry.

## Calendar

You can view by day, week, or month by clicking on any one of the Today/Week/Month buttons. Use the arrow buttons to move to a previous or future date.

### Create a new event

Double left-click on a day in the calendar to create a new event. If you have multiple cases, link the case to the calendar event using the drop-down menu in the Case field of the event pop-up screen.

### Save/export event

Save/export an event if you would also like to view it in a personal calendar. Once you click on the orange Save/Export as iCal button (this will work for all calendar types), it will appear as a download on your computer. If you export from your phone, the event will show up in your default calendar and you can choose which calendar to add it to.

Hearings and court report reminders that are entered in the hearing section of the Case Details page will auto populate into the Optima calendar.

## New Docs

New Docs tab, located on your Volunteer Dashboard, will show you all recently (within 14 days) uploaded documents to your case. After 14 days, they will no longer show up in this section, but they can still be found in the Documents tab of the Case Details page where they will live indefinitely.

## Continuing Education and Non-Case Activities

### ★ Training Logs

The Training Logs tab is located on your Volunteer Dashboard. You are required to complete a minimum of 12 Continuing Education (CE) hours per calendar year.

### Enter Continuing Education hours

Click on the Training Logs tab and then click on the green Add button. You can view your year-to-date totals in this section. Note that the status will state “pending” until the log is read and approved by your supervisor. Be sure to include a summary in the notes section.

Time needs to be entered in decimals. For example, 90 minutes will be 1.5, or one and a half hours, and you would list a 30-minute training as .5 for half an hour.

## Non-Case Activity Logs (Optional)

The Non-Case tab is located on your Volunteer Dashboard. This section allows you to enter hours and mileage for non-case related activities. For example, volunteering for different CASA events. If you would like or need the total of these activities for tax purposes, please let your supervisor know and this can be emailed to you.

To enter, click the Non-Case tab and then click the green Add button and enter the activity information and then click the green Create button. You can edit an existing entry by clicking on the Pen and Paper icon in the Action column.

## Case Management

### Case Details

The Cases tab shows you a list of cases you are currently assigned. You can get to the Case Details page by either clicking on the case number -or- clicking on the Pen and Paper icon in the Action column. The Case Details page contains the entire case information and is broken down into specific sections.

The Case Information section shows a quick summary of case name/number details and notes.

The Case Assignments section only contains CASA staff and CASA volunteer information. It is a history of all CASA staff/volunteers assigned to the case. A release date and reason will be entered by the CASA supervisor when a party is no longer assigned to the case.

### Children in Case

This section shows all children appointed to CASA. If a child has been closed out, they will have a closure date, but they will still appear in this section.

### Child Details

Find the child you want to review/update, and click on the Magnifying Glass icon in the Action column to view the individual Child Details page, which will have specific information about a child, including the Languages, Disabilities, and Schools tabs, where you will add information.

## Languages

1. Click on the Languages tab at the bottom of the Child Details page.
2. Click the Add button and choose from the drop-down menu (you can add multiple languages, but be sure to select the Primary Language checkbox to identify the child's primary language if they speak multiple languages).
3. Click the green Create button.

## Disabilities

1. Click on the Disabilities tab at the bottom of the Child Details page.
2. Click the Add button and choose from the drop-down menu (only add disabilities if you've received official documentation with diagnosis).
3. If disability type is not in the drop-down, let your supervisor know so that it can be added to the drop-down menu.
4. Click the green Create button.

## Schools

School information needs to be updated each time a child changes schools, no matter the reason.

1. Click on the Schools tab at the bottom of the Child Details page.
2. Go to School History section.
3. Click the Add button and enter the following fields:
  - a. School Name
4. Grade
5. School Start Date
6. School End Date (when appropriate)
7. Contact Name/Title/Phone/Email (when available; if you do not have this information when entering school, you can come back and edit later)
8. Click the green Create button.

## Update Schools

1. Click on the Schools tab at the bottom of the Child Details page.
2. Go to School History section.

3. Find the school you want to update and click on the Pen and Paper icon in the Action column.
4. Click the green Save button.


If school/daycare is not in the drop-down, fill out the School/Daycare Request form at <http://bit.ly/casaschoolupdate>. The form is also located on the CASA website in the password-protected Volunteer Resource area.

## **Placements**

### Ending a Placement

In the Current Placements section, click on the Magnifying Glass icon in the Action column of the placement that is ending. When the Placement Details page populates, click the green Edit button and enter the To Date field, the ending date of placement (last day child was at placement). Click the green Save button.


### Adding a Placement

 Placements need to be entered within the same week of the placement change.

In the Current Placements section, click the green Add button, then complete the steps below in each section:

- Children Placed: Click on "Select All" -or- an individual child, depending on which child will be placed in the facility
- Placed With (select one): Select a Placement Facility or Family Member from the drop-down menu
  - Placement Facilities begin with initials of placement type; some may begin with the actual placement type and then the name of the facility/foster home.  
Examples:
    - ◆ Criminal Justice Facilities will be entered as: CJF Gardner Betts Juvenile Justice Center
    - ◆ Foster Homes will be entered as: FH Mills, Nicole and Porter, Daniel
    - ◆ Shelters will be entered as: Shelter Austin Children's Shelter
- If you do not see the foster home (FH) or facility in the drop-down menu, fill out the Placement Request Form at <http://bit.ly/casaplacement>. The form is also located on the CASA website in the password-protected Volunteer Resource area.
- Family/fictive kin will only show up in the Family Member drop-down if they have been entered into the Family Members section on the Case Details page. Make sure

you enter them there first before attempting to add family/fictive kin as a new placement.

-  Placement Details—Enter all the following fields:
  - Hearing Date
  - From Date
  - With Siblings
  - Placement Type
  - Placement Reason
  - Reasonable Distance—Select checkbox if placement is within one hour of downtown courthouse.
  - In County—Select checkbox if placement is in Your Program’s County.
  - Click the green Create button.

All placements that are updated in the Current Placement section can also be found in the Placement History tab located at the bottom of the Case Details screen, along with a history of all placements where the child resided.

## **Family Members/Fictive Kin**

### Family Members Section

#### *Add Family/Fictive Kin*

- Click the green Add button to create a new family member record. Enter as much information as you have. You can always come back and edit any missing fields or update information (e.g., phone numbers, address, notes).
  - The *Active* checkbox should be selected if the family/fictive kin are engaged on the case (i.e. you speak to them on a regular to semiregular basis, they attend hearings, meetings, visits, etc.).
- After you hit the green *Create* button, the tabs Relationships/Languages/Disabilities/Concerns/Employment will show up at the bottom of the screen.
- Link family/fictive kin to the child through the Relationships tab.
  - Click the green *Add* button.
  - Check child name.
  - Choose appropriate Relationship Type from drop-down.

#### *Edit/View Family/Fictive Kin*

Click the Magnifying Glass icon in the Action column to edit and/or view details for any family/fictive kin already entered.



## 🌟 Languages

1. Click the *Languages* tab at the bottom of the Family Details page.
2. Click the green *Add* button and choose from the drop-down menu (you can add multiple languages, but be sure to select the Primary Language checkbox to identify the primary language if they speak multiple languages).
3. Click the green *Create* button.

### **Additional Options**

You can also add disabilities and employment information by clicking on those tabs. The Concerns tab is empty because each family member has a notes section where you can be more specific about any concerns.

## 🌟 Contact Logs

Each month use the Contact Log feature to document all mandatory advocacies (🌟). Some of these contacts may overlap. For instance, your visit to your CASA child and your contact with the placement provider may be part of the same contact log, just as a court hearing or supervised visit may also serve as your contact with the DFPS caseworker. With the contact log feature, you can select which people were included in the contact.

🌟 *It is extremely important that you are submitting contact logs as soon as possible. Talk with your supervisor about the deadline to complete your monthly contact logs (for example, some programs require that contact logs be submitted within 5 days of the activity happening and no later than the 5th of the following month.)*

### **Enter Amounts of Time**

Optima requires that you enter an amount of time. However, if you do not want to track your hours, enter 0 into the Hours field to create the contact log. Time entered for contact logs should be entered on an hourly basis. For instance, 60 minutes is entered as "1," and 15 minutes is entered as ".25," etc.

### **Creating a Contact Log**

The Contact Logs tab is located along the bottom of the Case Details page. Click the green Add button and follow the steps below:

1. Activity Date: This auto-fills when the Contact Log is opened, so be sure to change the date to reflect the actual activity date.

2. Activity Type: What did you do? Child face-to-face visit, attend court, contacted the placement, etc.
3. Select the Out of Court checkbox if Contact was not a court hearing.
4. Contact Type: How was the contact made? Face-to-face, email, phone, etc.
5. Hours: If you choose not to track your hours, you still need to enter 0 to be able to create the contact log.
6. Notes: Always enter notes, so your supervisor will be able to review and be kept up-to-date on your case.
7. Select party/parties that were contacted at time of activity by clicking the checkbox next to their name in the box located to the right of the Contact Log page.

Contact Logs can also be created directly from your Volunteer Dashboard. Click the Pen and Paper icon, and it will take you to a Contact Log screen.

### Contact Log Status

When Contact Logs are created, they auto-populate on your supervisor's dashboard, where they will read and then either approve or deny it. The Contact Log status will remain as "pending" until your supervisor opens and reviews it. You will be able to see the status from your Contact Logs tab.

### Denied Contact Logs

You are responsible for reviewing and updating any Denied status Contact Logs. Your supervisor will write questions/updates directly into the notes section of the Contact Log. Follow these steps below to update Denied Contact Logs:

1. Click the Pen and Paper icon of the Denied Contact Log to open Contact Log.
2. Review the notes section and make any updates.
3. Click the green Save button.

### Grouping Contact Logs

Ideally, you'll enter a Contact Log for each instance of an advocacy activity, but in some instances, you may save time by combining activities of the same type that occurred within the same calendar month. For example, if you have three phone calls with a DFPS worker during a month, you could enter three Contact Logs. However, the intensity of some case assignments may make it difficult to keep up with the data entry. It's permissible for volunteers to condense different contacts into a single Contact Log within these parameters:

- Do not combine different types of activities.
- Do not combine activities that occurred in different calendar months.

An example of a combined Contact Log would be, “Had 5 conversations with the paternal aunt regarding her frustration with the location of the weekly visits.”

### Capturing Miscellaneous Time

Volunteers may have miscellaneous activities that add to their volunteer time but aren't worthy of separate Contact Logs. To declare an accurate total of volunteer hours, a volunteer can create a Contact Log using “Admin Review/Research (Data Collection/Read)” to capture time spent on miscellaneous activities. Entering non-correspondence activities (e.g. updating Optima or writing court report)—there are “Updating/reviewing Optima” and “Court report (writing/editing)” activity types you can choose from the drop-down menu.

### View and Search Contact Logs

1. Click the blue View Notes button on the Contact Logs section, and all your approved contact notes will appear on one page.
2. Click the blue Search button.
3. Enter start/end date if you only want to search within a specific time frame
4. Unselect the Null checkbox to search by any of the following:
  - Subject
  - Party
  - Activity Type
  - Volunteer (Contact log entered by specific person—you, another volunteer, your supervisor)

### Associated Parties

An associated party is any professional connected with the case. Associated parties are added to a list that is viewable in all cases, so please use this feature to list professionals but not people whose record in Optima should be specific to a single case. Associated parties are divided into 3 categories:

- Attorneys
- Caseworkers (only DFPS)
- Interested parties (service providers and other professionals)

Please don't edit the job title or other information for an associated party to customize that person's information for a specific case. Changes made to contact information, job title, etc. will appear across all cases to which the associated party is linked.

The Associated Parties tab can be found at the bottom of the Case Details page.

### **Add Associated Party**

Click the green Add button, then click the Party Type button. Then search for party in the drop-down menu that will appear. Parties are listed by last name, first name.

If you do not find the name of the person you need in the drop down, fill out the Associated Party Request form at <http://bit.ly/assocparty>. The form is also located on the CASA website in the password-protected Volunteer Resource area.

When you save the Associated Party, you will be redirected to the details screen for that specific party. Depending on whether the person is assigned to the child(ren) or the parent(s), you'll select the green Add button for either the children, parents, or both, to link them. For instance, link the father's attorney to the father and the child's therapist to the child.

### ***Linking Family Member***

Choose the name of the Family Member. The date will auto-populate to the current date, so be sure to change to the actual date they were assigned. The release date and release reasons should be left blank.

### ***Linking Child(ren)***

Choose the name of the child or select all. The date will auto-populate to the current date, so be sure to change to the actual date they were assigned. The release date and release reason fields should be left blank.

### **Release Associated Party**

Find the party you want to release and click the Magnifying Glass icon in the Action column. This will take you to the Associated Party Details page, where you will scroll down to the Child section or Family Member section. Click the Pen and Paper icon to release the party from either a child or family member, depending on to whom they are assigned. Enter the release date. Click the green Save button.

Do not delete, as it's important we keep a history of all associated parties.

The associated party will still show up in the Associated Parties section, but now the checkbox in the Released column will be selected.

## Case History

We do not delete any information when updating a case. Optima allows you to keep a history of all changes (e.g., children in a case, placements, schools, caseworkers, etc.). It is very important to keep a history of anyone who has ever been involved in the case, no matter the part they played.

## Documents

### Upload Document

Before you upload a file, make sure you change the file name to something you can easily find, because once it's uploaded, you *cannot* change the file name.

We recommend you use the following format when naming the file:

*Last name, First name - Document name*

Examples:

- Grimes, Rick - psychological
- Grimes, Judith - daycare report
- Grimes, Carl - report card

To upload a document, go to the bottom of the Case Details page to the Documents tab:

1. Click the green *Add* button.
2. Click the *Choose Files* button to find the document you want to upload. You can multi-select files.
3. Choose Document Type from the drop-down menu.
  - Use the Case File (Documents) Contents form at <http://bit.ly/casafiledocs>. The form is also located on the CASA website in the password-protected Volunteer Resource area.
4. Enter Document Date. This is the date the document was completed/signed, not when it was uploaded. Be sure to change this date if different from upload date.
5. Click the green *Save* button.

## View Document

1. Choose Document Type from the drop-down menu.
2. Click the blue *Apply* button.
3. Click the *Magnifying Glass* icon in the Action column to view a specific document. The document will download, and you can open to read contents.

## **Hearings**

### Create a New Hearing

Hearings must be entered within 1 week of the last hearing date.

#### **Mandatory Fields Pre-Hearing**

Go to the Hearings tab, located at the bottom of the Case Details page. Click the green Add button, and enter the following:

- Hearing Date
- Hearing Time
- Hearing Location
- Judge

Click the green *Create* button and several new sections will populate:

1. Click Hearing Types tab.
2. Click the green *Add* button and choose Hearing Type from the drop-down.
3. Click the green *Create* button.
4. Go to Hearing Participants section.
5. Click Child tab.
6. Click the green *Add* button and Select All.
7. Click the green *Create* button.

### Edit or Update a Hearing

#### **Mandatory Fields Post-Hearing**

Go to Hearings tab located at the bottom of the Case Details page, and find the hearing you want to edit/update. Click the Magnifying Glass icon in the Action column to open the Hearing Details page, and complete the following:

1. In Hearing section, click the green Edit button.
2. Update the Hearing Status field from blank to updated status (e.g., completed/recessed).
3. Click the green Save button.
4. Click Hearing Outcomes tab.
5. Click the green Add button.
6. Choose recommendations made by CASA from the drop-down (you can select multiple options).
7. Click the green Create button.

## Volunteer Input

*Once assigned to your case, your CASA supervisor will provide more specific instruction for this section.*

Recommendations are entered in number form into the Accepted/Rejected/Negotiated fields. Once the hearing has been completed, you will find the hearing in the Hearings tab. Click the Magnifying Glass icon in the Action column to get to the Hearing Details page and the Volunteer Input section.

Click the green Add button, and the Add Volunteer Input screen below will populate. Complete the fields in this section. Only select the Excused checkbox if you did not attend court and your supervisor was aware you would be absent. Once you click the green Create button, you will see the fields populate into the Volunteer Input section.

There are a few other sections in the Hearing Details page:

- Court Ordered Services: Allows you to add what service was ordered.
- Visitation: Allows you to choose the type of visitation per family member and child as well as specified frequency and actual frequency.
- Permanent Plan: Allows you to choose CASA's primary permanent plan type for the child(ren) as well as the DFPS permanent plan type.

## **Case Closure Wellbeing**

Create an Assessment (Child Closure Survey) for each child when closing a full case or an individual child:

1. At the bottom of the Case Details page, click the Wellbeing tab and then click the green Add button.
2. Choose the child from the Child Name/Age drop-down.
3. Choose Case Closure from the Wellbeing Category drop-down.
4. Choose Child Closure Survey from the Assessment Name.
5. Click the green Assess button.
6. The Add Assessment screen will pop up asking if you are sure you want to continue because you'll need to complete the entire assessment (14 yes/no questions) in one sitting.
7. Click the green Save button when complete. You will not be able to save if the Assessment is not complete.
8. You can edit the Assessment by clicking on the Pen and Paper icon.



# SAMPLE PROGRAM POLICIES

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## Code of Conduct

### Mission Statement

CASA exists to promote and protect the best interest of children who have been abused or neglected, by training volunteers to advocate for them in courts, in schools, and in our community to help them find safe, permanent and loving homes.

### Vision Statement

For every child who needs us, CASA envisions a trained volunteer advocate, a safe home and a promising future.

### Values Statements

In working to achieve our vision, we act on the following core values:

- Excellence in all our endeavors.
- Commitment to creating a welcoming space where every child, parent, family, volunteer, staff member, board member, and supporter feels valued and respected.
- Empowering the community through strong screening, training, supervision and support of volunteers.
- Honorable and respectful involvement in the child welfare system, with the courts and all parties.
- Independent and educated recommendations, true to our understanding of each child's best interest, that prioritize children's safety and, wherever possible, preserve connections to their families.
- Responsible use of resources to maximize our positive impact on the child welfare system.

### Ethics Statement

It is CASA's duty to promote the safety and well-being of the children we serve. We shall protect children from abuse and from practices that are emotionally and physically damaging, disrespectful, degrading, dangerous, exploitive or intimidating.

Our commitment as an organization is to create an environment for children and youth that is safe, nurturing, empowering, and which promotes growth and success for the children we serve. This Code of Conduct outlines specific expectations of employees and

volunteers as we strive to accomplish our mission together.

1. Children and youth will be treated with respect at all times.
2. Children and youth will be treated fairly regardless of race, color, religion, sex, physical and mental disabilities and national origin.
3. Employees and volunteers will not swear or tell off-color jokes in the presence of children or youth.
4. Employees and volunteers will not discuss with children or youth private details of their personal lives or sexual encounters or in any way involve children in their personal problems or issues.
5. Employees and volunteers will not use or be under the influence of alcohol or illegal drugs in the presence of children or youth.
6. Employees and volunteers will not have sexually-oriented materials, including printed or internet pornography, in the presence of children or youth.
7. Employees and volunteers will not have secrets with children or youth.
8. Employees and volunteers will avoid wearing provocative or revealing attire in the presence of children or youth.
9. Employees and volunteers will not stare or comment on a child's or youth's body.
10. Employees and volunteers will adhere to uniform standards of affection.
11. Employees and volunteers will avoid affection that cannot be observed by a third party.
12. Employees and volunteers shall not abuse children or youth in any way, including the following:
  - Physical abuse: hitting, spanking, shaking, slapping, unnecessary restraints
  - Verbal abuse: degrading, threatening, cursing
  - Sexual abuse: inappropriate touch, exposing oneself, sexually-oriented conversations
  - Mental abuse: shaming, humiliation, cruelty
  - Neglect: withholding food, water, shelter

No type of abuse will be tolerated and will result in immediate dismissal from CASA. CASA will fully cooperate with authorities if allegations of abuse are made and investigated.

Employees and volunteers will report concerns or complaints about CASA employees, volunteers or children to the Executive Director.

CASA employees and volunteers shall not have engaged in or been accused or convicted of child abuse, indecency with a child, or injury to a child.

## Program Policies

### 1. MINIMUM EXPECTATIONS OF SERVICE TO A CASE AND BEST PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

#### A. Advocates will:

1. In a timely manner after appointment, obtain firsthand a clear understanding of the needs and situation of the child by reviewing all relevant documents and records and interviewing the child(ren), parents, relatives, social workers, teachers, doctors, therapists and other persons with significant knowledge of the child to determine the facts and circumstances of the child.
  - a. **Best Practice Recommendation:** Documents should be reviewed by the volunteer within 14 days and by the Case Supervisor within 7 days. Children should be interviewed within 14 days of appointment and other relevant parties should be interviewed within 30 days of transfer from Family Engagement.
2. Maintain confidentiality of all issues and records of the case and return all case documents to the CASA program after the case is closed.
  - a. **Best Practice Recommendation:** Records should be returned within 30 days for hard copies, and by the end of the calendar month in which the case is closed for uploading all digital files into Optima and deleting from volunteer's possession.
3. Notify all parties to the case of CASA's appointment.
  - a. **Best Practice Recommendation:** Notify parties within 2 business days of the Supervisor's and/or volunteer's appointment to the case.
4. Communicate with the Department of Family & Protective Services (DFPS) caseworker after appointment and at least one time per month for the duration of the case.
  - a. **Best Practice Recommendation:** Contact the DFPS caseworker within one week of appointment.
5. Meet the child(ren) within 30 days and meet in person with the child(ren) at least one time per month if they live within 60 miles of the CASA office.
  - a. **Best Practice Recommendation:** Meet child(ren) in person within 14 days of case assignment. Children will be seen in person one time per month for regular visit at the placement, and one time per month face-to-face contact, such as observing a visit, transporting child to activity or service, court,

school meeting, etc. When possible, children should be notified in advance when the visit will occur. In the event that the visit has to be canceled, the advocate will notify the child directly whenever possible.

- If children are placed:
    - Between 60 and 180 miles from the CASA office, then the advocate will meet in person with the child(ren) at least once every three months.
      - ◆ **Best Practice Recommendation:** Children will be seen every 60 days in person.
    - 181 miles or more from the CASA office, then the advocate will meet in person with the child(ren) at least once every six months.
      - ◆ **Best Practice Recommendation:** Children will be seen no less than once every three months in person, if in the state of Texas.
  - 50% of the advocate's in-person contacts should occur where the child lives.
  - When monthly visits are not required (based on location), advocates will supplement with other types of monthly age appropriate contact with the child(ren), including video conferencing, telephone calls, e-mails, and/or letters as applicable for the child's age and interests. All contacts (whether electronic or otherwise) should be documented and are considered to be part of the case file. The Supervisor should be copied and included in the volunteer's supplemental correspondence whenever possible.
    - **Best Practice Recommendation:** If the advocate is not seeing the child in person every month, the child should receive at least one letter/postcard, email or text message, when age-appropriate, in the months they are not seen. It is also best practice to use FaceTime or Skype to speak to children in months that face-to-face contact cannot be made. This communication should be documented in Optima, and photos/scanned images of any non-digital correspondence should be uploaded and shared with the Case Supervisor.
6. Meet in person with the child's primary placement provider in a timely manner after placement occurs, and communicate with the placement providers at least once a month thereafter for the duration of the assignment of the child's case.
- a. **Best Practice Recommendation:** Initial contact with the primary placement provider should occur within 2 business days of CASA appointment and

in-person contact should occur within 14 days of placement. Communication with the placement provider should occur at least 2 times per month for the duration of the case.

7. Advocate for the child(ren)'s best interest in the community by interfacing with mental health, medical, legal, educational and other community systems to assure that the child(ren)'s needs in these areas are met.
  - a. **Best Practice Recommendation:** The advocate will check in with collaterals, such as teachers/school staff, therapists, attorneys, medical/dental health professionals, or any other person involved in the treatment of, or who has a professional/client relationship with the child, at least once per month either in person, or via phone/text, or email.
8. Determine if a Permanency Plan, an educational passport, and a medical passport have been created for the child(ren).
  - a. **Best Practice Recommendation:** When appropriate, the advocate will serve as the child's Surrogate Parent for Education, after having completed the one-hour training and being appointed as such by the Court.
9. Participate in all scheduled case-related meetings.
  - a. **Best Practice Recommendation:** The advocate should participate in person; however, when in-person participation is not possible, the volunteer will participate by phone and ensure that the Supervisor or another CASA staff member is able to attend in person. The volunteer will confer with the Case Supervisor prior to each scheduled meeting regarding CASA's position and expected topics of discussion.
10. Seek cooperative solutions by facilitating and maintaining communication with the child(ren)'s parents, relatives, attorney ad litem, social workers, teachers, doctors, therapists and other service providers as applicable.
11. Appear at all hearings to advocate for the child(ren)'s best interest and permanency. Provide testimony when necessary, making recommendations for specific appropriate services for the child, and when appropriate, the child's family. Provide written court reports for all permanency and review hearings.
  - a. **Best Practice Recommendation:** Reasons for each recommendation should be documented. The Supervisor or other approved CASA staff must be the CASA representative to sign all court orders. Both the volunteer and Supervisor will sign court orders in person that result from a hearing in which the volunteer is present. The volunteer will meet in person or over the phone with the Supervisor prior to any courtroom presentation, whether it

be a regularly scheduled hearing or specific testimony. The volunteer will adhere to CASA of Your County's guidelines/expectations of courtroom presentations/testimony. Court reports will be submitted to the Supervisor no later than 14 business days before the court hearing date, as long as the hearing was announced more than 3 weeks in advance.

12. On each case, assigned volunteers and Supervisor will communicate with one another at least once a month to update records and contact logs and participate together in scheduled case conferences.
  - a. **Best Practice Recommendation:** All contact logs will be entered in Optima within 7 days of the activity date. The volunteer will meet with the Supervisor at least once quarterly in person. The volunteer will initiate contact via phone or email with the Supervisor at least twice per month, not including submitting contact logs in Optima. Court reports will be completed for all hearings announced with at least 2 weeks' notice.
13. Inform the court promptly of important developments in the case through appropriate means as determined by court rules and statutes.
  - a. **Best Practice Recommendation:** Inform the legal parties, and Court when appropriate, of any case updates or substantial issues in a timely manner, including a change in CASA's position or Permanency Plan.
14. Monitor implementation of service plans and court orders assuring the court-ordered services are implemented in a timely manner and that review hearings are held in accordance with the law.
  - a. **Best Practice Recommendation:** Follow up with DFPS regarding court orders/referrals/mandated case meetings within 2 weeks after each hearing. The advocate will ensure that the parent(s) are provided with a Release of Information form as soon as possible after meeting them in person.
15. Participate in 12 hours of Continuing Education training per year.
  - a. **Best Practice Recommendation:** The Continuing Education hours should be documented in Optima by the volunteer no later than 30 days after completion. Their Supervisor will check in with the volunteer during the quarterly in-person meeting to ensure that Continuing Education requirements are being met, and will regularly recommend Continuing Education opportunities that would meet the volunteer's individual needs for growth and improvement in their role. The volunteer will also seek out their own opportunities for Continuing Education and will discuss with their Supervisor.

## B. Volunteer's Role as it Relates to CASA

It is rare for a volunteer and the CASA staff to be in conflict regarding their positions on a case, however at times this situation may exist. When a volunteer and Supervisor or Program Manager have a conflict that cannot be resolved among themselves, the Director of Advocacy and/or the Chief Program Officer will act as a mediator to resolve the conflict. If a volunteer and the staff cannot reach consensus it is imperative the volunteer understand that CASA is appointed as the guardian ad litem to every child served by its program. Volunteers act as designated representatives of the CASA program. Therefore, volunteers are expected to discuss areas of controversy and conflict and defer final judgment to CASA of Your County.

- **Best Practice Recommendation:** Refer to rights and duties of GAL (Texas Family Code FAM § 107.002). Should a volunteer not adhere to the policies set forth, but not qualify for immediate dismissal from CASA, the Supervisor may put the volunteer on an Advocacy Improvement Plan after staffing the situation with the Advocacy Program Manager and either the Associate Director or Director of Advocacy. To the extent that it is appropriate, the volunteer will be included in the development of the Advocacy Improvement Plan.

## C. Grounds for Immediate Dismissal from CASA

1. Taking action without CASA or court approval that endangers the child or is outside the role or powers of the CASA program.
2. Initiating ex parte communication with the court.
3. Violating a CASA policy, court rule, or law.
4. Failing to complete required pre-service and in-service Continuing Education training.
5. Failing to demonstrate an ability to effectively carry out assigned duties.
6. Falsifying a volunteer application or misrepresenting facts during the screening process.
7. Having allegations of child abuse/neglect brought against you.
8. Experiencing an irresolvable conflict of interest.

## 2. ADVOCATE-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

The advocate must establish a relationship with the child that promotes the child's well-being and enhances the advocate's objectivity while serving as the guardian ad litem. **In order to establish such a relationship, adherence to the following policies is required:**

## A. Maintaining appropriate boundaries with children

Appropriate standards of affection help to promote a positive, nurturing environment for children, while protecting them from harm and protecting employees and volunteers from misunderstandings.

The following guidelines must be carefully followed by all employees and volunteers working with children:

**Appropriate physical interactions include:** Side hugs; Pats on the shoulder, back or head; High-fives, hand-slapping and handshakes; Verbal praise; Holding hands (with young children in escorting situations); Allowing pre-school or kindergarten-aged children to sit on employee's or volunteer's knees. If a child is verbal, the advocate must ask the child's permission before initiating any physical contact.

**Inappropriate physical interactions include:** Full-frontal hugs; Kisses; Showing affection in isolated areas; Sleeping in a bed with a child; Allowing children older than kindergarten-aged to sit on employee's or volunteer's knees; Wrestling, Piggyback rides, Tickling; Any type of massage given by or to a child; Any form of affection that is unwanted by the child or the employee or volunteer; Compliments relating to physique or body development; Touching bottom, chest or genital areas.

During the course of their CASA work, specifically while on outings in the community, it is possible that the advocate will need to facilitate the child's use of the bathroom. Children who are on an outing with an advocate are not to be sent to bathrooms without adult supervision. At minimum, when a child is using a multi-stall bathroom, the advocate should check the public bathroom for potential risks prior to child(ren) entering, be standing near the entryway so they can have auditory supervision of the child. Advocates can and are encouraged to be inside the facilities, when possible, so they can be easily seen by the children and so they are able to immediately stop any inappropriate activity. They should not, however, be behind closed doors with a child. For single stall bathrooms, the advocate should be positioned outside of the bathroom to make sure no one else enters the restroom. In rare situations, diapering of a young child may be required. When diapering, advocates should be in a visible area of the room where they can be observed by others. Diaper changing should be documented in an activity log in Optima. In the event of an unexpected one-on-one meeting with a child or if something unusual occurs during a private meeting, the volunteer will notify the Supervisor immediately and the interaction will be documented in Optima within 1 business day.



## B. Appropriate Discipline and Prohibited Abuse

Rarely will an advocate be faced with a situation where it is appropriate to discipline a child. However, it is reasonable to assume this situation may occur. Therefore, CASA takes the following position regarding disciplinary methods.

It is expected that advocates will comply with all laws regarding child abuse as specified in the Texas Family and Penal Codes. Furthermore, CASA does not endorse or condone any form of violent disciplinary methods toward children. **Physical discipline may not be used by anyone representing CASA under any circumstance. Further, using language or mode of speech that is degrading or embarrassing (i.e., abusive verbal communication) is not an acceptable means of discipline.** Discipline must be constructive and educational in nature. Correction must be fair, reasonable, consistent and related to the specific misbehavior. Discipline should be individualized and age-appropriate. Examples of appropriate discipline include giving the child choices, connecting then correcting, etc.

**Any incident of unacceptable verbal/non-verbal discipline (as described/defined above) of a child that occurs while conducting CASA business will be considered child abuse and appropriately reported to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. Any staff or volunteer who is alleged to have engaged in any form of child abuse will be reported to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services and immediately placed on administrative leave for the duration of the investigation. If child abuse allegations are substantiated, the volunteer and/or staff members involved will be subject to immediate termination.**

If any staff member, volunteer or board member has reason to believe a child has been mistreated or has reason to believe that a child is in imminent danger, that person has an obligation to comply with the Texas Family Code 261.101 regarding the requirement to report child abuse and neglect.

**Child abuse can be reported to TDFPS at 1.800.252.5400.**

## C. Maintaining Appropriate Communication with Children

Advocates are prohibited from speaking to children in a way that is, or could be construed by any observer, as harsh, coercive, threatening, intimidating, shaming, derogatory, demeaning or humiliating.

**Appropriate verbal interactions include:** Positive reinforcement, appropriate jokes, encouragement, and praise.

**Inappropriate verbal interactions include:** secrets; cursing, shaming, belittling, name-calling; harsh language that may frighten, threaten or humiliate children; derogatory remarks about the child, their family, or other parties in the case; discussing sexual encounters or in any way involving children in their personal problems or issues; sexual jokes; making threats to withhold care.

#### **D. Transportation**

*This policy varies from program to program.* In the course of fulfilling the duties as a child's advocate, it will be necessary for the advocate to have in-person contact with their child(ren). An advocate may provide transportation for the child(ren) but is not required to do so.

**The advocate acknowledges that the risk of liability is covered only by their own insurance and they choose to accept that responsibility.**

An advocate who wishes to provide transportation to the child(ren) must maintain a safe driving record and cooperate with CASA to obtain copies of the same on request. **A signed transportation release form, current proof of liability insurance and a copy of a valid and current driver's license must be on file in the CASA office before an advocate can transport a child in an automobile.** A volunteer may not transport a child in a vehicle other than a standard automobile without the express written consent of the volunteer's Supervisor and the child's guardian or the child's managing conservator. The advocate is required to ensure that children are restrained in age appropriate safety restraints when being transported. **A volunteer should notify the assigned Supervisor each time they transport the child(ren).** All transports must also be documented in the case file (i.e., Optima Contact Log) within 1 business day by either the volunteer or Supervisor. Documentation should include the date, names of any children transported, and the starting and ending locations.

CASA considers travel and parking expenses incurred by volunteers as an in-kind tax-deductible donation to the agency and therefore does not reimburse volunteers for travel expenses. Additionally, CASA does not reimburse volunteers for any case-related expenses incurred while performing the duties of a Court Appointed Special Advocate.

#### **E. Gifts or Financial Assistance for Children or Families**

Advocates are prohibited from giving cash to children or families, and from giving gifts or purchasing items for children or families that cost more than \$25. If a child, caregiver or

family needs assistance of greater than \$25, a request can be made through the program. CASA will provide birthday gifts and holiday gifts for advocates to give to the child(ren).

## F. Other Prohibitions

Additionally, advocates are prohibited from the following activities:

1. Introducing or identifying the child as being appointed to CASA to anyone not professionally related to the child's case.
2. Involving the child with anyone who is not related to the child's case.
3. Taking the child to the advocate's home or to the home of the advocate's personal friends or family.
4. Giving legal advice or therapeutic counseling.
5. Making placement arrangements for the child.
6. Taking a child on an overnight outing.
7. Taking a child on an outing that includes aquatic activities (e.g., any water activity that requires changing clothes).
8. Signing a waiver of liability for a child while on an outing (e.g., trampoline park).
9. Engaging in activities which are likely to result in conflict of interest or expose the program or advocate to criminal or civil liability.
10. Causing a child or family to become dependent on the advocate for services that are provided by other agencies or organizations. Such activities may jeopardize the safety of the child, the integrity of the program, or the objectivity of the advocate.
11. Dispensing prescribed or over-the-counter medication to or authorizing medical treatment for the child without the permission and direction of the child's conservator or placement.
12. Carrying a firearm or weapon when in the presence of the child(ren), except for law enforcement officers who are required to carry a weapon.
13. Failing to comply with CASA of Your County's safe and drug free work policy (below) as it applies to employees.

## 3. SAFE AND DRUG FREE WORKPLACE POLICY

CASA is committed to providing volunteers and clients with a safe, efficient and productive environment. Using or being under the influence of drugs or alcohol may pose serious safety and health risks.

Drinking alcohol while in the presence of clients is prohibited. Additionally, because the children to whom we are assigned may have had extreme experiences concerning abuse of alcohol, it is prohibited that alcohol be consumed prior to (i.e., on the same day) meetings with the clients and is prohibited before transporting clients.

Volunteers using prescription drugs or over the counter drugs are responsible for being aware of any potential side effects such drugs may have on their judgment or ability to perform their duties. If such use may impair the volunteer's judgment or ability to perform their job, the volunteer should report the potential side effects to their Supervisor prior to meeting with clients. Together they can plan the best strategy for meeting the client's needs during the time the medication is required.

Any illegal activity will be reported to appropriate law enforcement officials. CASA will cooperate fully with law enforcement agencies in the detection, arrest and prosecution of any employee or other person engaged in such activity.

#### 4. CASE CLOSURE

The role of a Court Appointed Special Advocate is by nature a transitory one. An effective advocate recognizes that children who have been abused or neglected face many unpredictable transitions in their lives. In order to minimize the negative impact of such transitions, an advocate is responsible for providing a healthy transition for the child(ren) when CASA is dismissed from the case. It is CASA of Your County's expectation that each advocate will carefully plan and execute their final contact with the child(ren) on their case, and that their exit from the case not be abrupt. A volunteer's Supervisor can provide resources to assist in smooth transitions for children.

**CASA requires advocates to cease contact with the child(ren) after their case is closed.** If a child, family or adoptive family initiates or tries to maintain contact with their volunteer, the volunteer must inform their Supervisor and should seek to limit that contact. It is not permissible for a volunteer to initiate contact with a former child, family or adoptive family after case closure.

- **Best Practice Recommendation:** If a closed case is re-opened, CASA will make best efforts to re-assign the same volunteer from the previous case, if the volunteer is willing/able and it is in the child's best interest. If a closed case re-opens and it is determined that contact by the volunteer was not ceased when it was supposed to, that volunteer may not be assigned to the case again.

In very specific cases, when a youth is at least 18 years old, on track to become independent, and without adult supports or permanency ("aging out"), the volunteer may

choose to become a “healthy adult connection.” This is not an expectation of CASA and the role would not be as the youth’s advocate, but rather as a healthy adult who agrees to be supportive in selective ways. A Permanency Pact is beneficial and encouraged in defining this relationship. If a volunteer is considering this possibility, they should first discuss it thoroughly with CASA staff before speaking with the youth. Again, this arrangement would occur only after the case has closed, after case files have been returned to the CASA offices and the youth is at least 18 years of age.

## 5. CONFIDENTIALITY

CASA is committed to the confidentiality of certain information regarding its clients, volunteers, staff, Board and donors as a means of ensuring compliance with the law and protection of clients’ safety and anonymity. Confidentiality is defined as the assurance that access to information regarding any client, volunteer, employee, Board member or donor shall be strictly controlled, and that any violation of such control shall be a breach of faith. Information regarding any client, volunteer, employee, Board member or donor of CASA shall not be used for purposes that were not intended by the person when the information was provided. Information on individual clients is used solely for the provision of services for them.

Confidential information shall include but is not limited to the following:

- Any and all case files, records or other information regarding a current or former client, including their names, addresses of employment, residence, and family addresses of clients, staff, volunteers, student interns, donors and board members.
- Photographs taken of clients unless explicit permission is provided to the Executive Director or their designee by the individual involved.
- The contents of any current or former employee’s personnel file.
- The contents of any current or former volunteer’s file.
- The contents of any current or former donor’s records at CASA.

All board members, employees and volunteers will receive a copy of CASA of Your County’s Confidentiality Policy and will be asked to sign an agreement of confidentiality. This agreement will cover confidentiality during the board member’s tenure or the employee’s or volunteer’s service, and will also include a provision for maintaining confidentiality after board tenure, employment or volunteer service is over.

All subpoenas for records must be served to the Executive Director (or their designee) as custodian of records. Response to a subpoena of records will be decided on a case-by-case basis. CASA of Your County’s custodian of records may consult other legal counsel

regarding such subpoena. The response to the request will then become a part of the record. CASA has the right to require 24-hour notice for purposes of making the file available.

Except by order of the court, as a general rule, no information pertaining to a client, volunteer, employee or board member may be released without a properly executed written consent form.

Information may be released in an extreme emergency with the express approval of the Executive Director. This includes but is not limited to suspected child abuse, medical emergencies that are life-threatening to client or child, medical incompetence, or when the safety or welfare of clients is at extreme risk.

CASA is required by law to report to the proper authorities any act of child abuse, suspected child abuse, elder abuse, or abuse of a disabled person.

It is CASA of Your County's policy that it cannot keep confidential any threats to human life of either a suicidal or homicidal nature.

Notwithstanding any of the above, CASA may determine that disclosure of confidential information shall not be made even though all requirements of release have been met. Where CASA concludes that the requested release would endanger the client, CASA of Your County, other clients, staff, student interns, volunteers or board members, the Executive Director is not bound by the requirements of release. CASA may also conclude that disclosure in a particular case will create an appearance of non-confidential services that will undermine the integrity of the program. The Executive Director (in consultation with an attorney) is authorized to resist disclosure by all appropriate and lawful means, citing statute, public policy, contractual obligation, constitutional privacy claims, etc. Where the client, nonetheless, seeks disclosure, the Executive Director should advise the President of the Board of the decision to resist and seek board support for their decision since CASA resources may have to be allocated to the protection of confidential information.

Financial or statistical information regarding policies, procedures, or methods of determining eligibility or any other information that does not identify a client is not considered confidential.

## A. Case Records

A confidential, written case record shall be maintained on each child.

- All case records, open or closed, will be regarded as confidential. Records on open cases will be kept in secure, locked files, and may also be stored electronically with appropriate security provisions. Records of closed cases may be kept in offsite storage and/or electronically, with appropriate provisions made for security of both hard copy and electronic files.
- A volunteer officially assigned to a case by CASA may possess a copy of the case file and/or Optima access on their assigned case **only**. It is the responsibility of the volunteer to protect the security and confidentiality of this file and to return this file to the CASA office immediately upon their resignation from the case. **Optima access to the case in question will also cease upon case closure.**
  - **Best Practice Recommendation:** The Supervisor will close the case in Optima within the same calendar month as the Court's case closure date. The volunteer must have all documentation entered by this time.
- CASA will release information contained in volunteer files to other CASA programs to which the volunteer may apply in the future only with the express written permission of the volunteer.
- Content of case records shall be considered to include all materials containing information provided by the client, other case parties, and professional providers, including tape recordings, photos, videotapes, interviews, etc. The following shall govern the content of case records:
  - The content of case files is limited to information that is required for statistical and funding purposes, establishing goals for permanency and for documenting the need for services.
  - Each entry into client files must indicate the name and date of the staff member making the entry.
  - Telephone and electronic communications related to the case are required to be documented within the case file.
  - Former client files and closed cases will be destroyed in accordance with CASA's document retention and destruction policy and schedule.

## 6. COMMUNICATION

### A. Official Communication

Because the volunteer acts as a representative of CASA on the case to which they are assigned, it is required that all official communication (case documents, letters, reports,

notices, evaluations etc.) be routed through the CASA office utilizing the agency's appropriate contact information. The CASA logo and letterhead are the property of CASA and may not be used or reproduced without the express consent of a volunteer's Supervisor, Advocate Program Manager, Associate Director of Advocacy, Director of Advocacy or the Chief Program Officer.

- **Best Practice Recommendation:** All electronic communication to/from volunteers will go through a separate email address that the volunteer creates solely for the purpose of CASA communications. The volunteer will have an electronic signature at the end of every email that includes their contact information, as well as contact information for CASA of Your County. The Supervisor will be copied on all electronic communication that the volunteer sends and receives.

## B. Informal Communication

Throughout the duration of the case, in the course of fulfilling the responsibilities of an advocate, it will be necessary for the advocate to communicate on a regular basis with case participants. Volunteers are required to contact and update their Supervisor regarding their case **at least once monthly**. Additionally, it is imperative a volunteer's Supervisor be kept apprised of important case developments. Volunteers are prohibited from making written recommendations to the Court that have not first been discussed and agreed upon with the Supervisor. Conversely, Supervisors may not submit written recommendations to the Court without the knowledge and agreement of the volunteer.

Email communication should be considered as written communication and as such it is essential to maintain objectivity and professionalism when communicating in this manner. All email communication can potentially be subpoenaed in the event of a trial. It is a good practice when utilizing email communication to copy the Supervisor. CASA strongly discourages advocates from releasing their personal contact information to children and their families.

## C. Media

To ensure that the confidentiality of children is always protected, and that CASA has a cohesive, consistent message being delivered to the community, all volunteer communication with media (including television, newspapers, radio, blogs/online publications, etc. - even small publications like church bulletins or organizational emails) should be coordinated through CASA of Your County's Director of Communications. If a volunteer is contacted by the media, has a media connection or idea they would like to



pursue, or has an opportunity to be featured for their volunteer work, they should immediately communicate with their Supervisor who will connect them with the Director of Communication to consider how this opportunity will be best pursued.

#### **D. Online Communication and Social Media Guidelines**

CASA believes that social media, when used appropriately, can be a powerful tool to increase awareness, support and sense of community for those of us engaged in advocacy for children who've been abused or neglected. We also believe it is important that those who choose to engage in social media understand what is recommended, expected and required when they discuss CASA-related topics. Our ability to serve children depends entirely on the trust and support of our community, and it is critical that we handle the confidential information entrusted to us responsibly.

**When you engage in social media and online communication, you become a public figure. As a public figure that is associated with CASA, you have a responsibility to help protect this organization and our clients.** The following expectations, along with both positive and negative social media examples, are intended to give you guidance in both promoting and protecting CASA, and to protect the children we serve.

1. **Never reveal confidential information.** Sharing stories that illustrate the value of CASA advocacy for children is often the most powerful way to engage the public in our cause and promote empathy for the children we serve. However, our standards and policies prohibit the sharing of confidential information.
  - a. **It is unacceptable to discuss online any identifiable details of cases. This includes names, ages, case-specific details, time-specific statements and the sharing of photographs.** It is acceptable to discuss general details and to use non-identifying pseudonyms and non-time-specific statements so long as the information provided does not contain information recognizable to the family or others associated with the family or case. For example, use general terms such as "youth" instead of "13-year-old girl." You should be careful to protect the dignity of families, children and social agencies, even if they are not named.
2. **Use common sense.** Don't put anything online that you would not want to see with your name attached to it on the front page of the paper where your boss, your mom, your co-workers and neighbors can read it. Remember, it is possible that you will work with this judge, Supervisor, caseworker, lawyer, etc. again in the future or even bump into them on the street, so don't burn bridges. Even if you

don't see them again, CASA definitely will, and it is important not to hurt CASA's relationships.

- a. **Keep in mind that anything you say online is not private.** Evaluate what you say about working with CASA in advance to make sure that your online statements will not affect your position in the courtroom when you are advocating for a child.
3. **Don't be a hero.** If you see something negative posted about CASA online, don't jump to the defense immediately; you might just feed the flames of someone who just wants to pick a fight. Please inform CASA if you see a negative representation of CASA online and we will determine the best way to respond or not.
4. **Be transparent.** Identify yourself and your role at CASA when you discuss CASA-related matters. Write in the first person. If you have a vested interest in something you are discussing, be the first to point it out. Be clear that you are speaking for yourself, that the opinions expressed are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of CASA.
5. **Be considerate.** Remember that anyone, including volunteers and CASA staff, may be actively reading what you publish online. Refrain from any communication intended to bash or embarrass CASA, families, board members, donors or your colleagues. If you have suggestions for improvements please go through the proper channels to air your concerns and share your suggestions. Always show proper consideration for other people's privacy and for topics that may be considered objectionable or inflammatory, such as politics and religion.
  - a. **Always consider how other parties on a case might feel about your statements.** While we recognize the tremendous work that advocates do every day, be careful about implying that another party on a case did not do their job adequately, or accidentally insulting anyone involved with the case, as you could hurt feelings and damage both your and CASA's relationship with those involved in this system.
6. **Be accurate.** Even though your posts may be primarily made up of personal opinion, do your research and check that your facts are accurate. Make sure you have permission to post any copyrighted information (e.g., research, statistics) and be careful about posting or linking to items that may contain viruses. Be the first to admit to and correct your own mistakes.
7. **Try to add value.** Does your posting provide worthwhile information and perspective? Does it help people better understand and feel more connected to our cause? Does it build a positive sense of community?

8. **Always comply with the law in regard to copyright/plagiarism.** Never post someone else's work without their express permission (other than short quotes that comply with the "fair use" exceptions).
9. **Be aware of laws related to libel and defamation of character.** Defamation of character can lead to lawsuits against the author of the statement and will reflect negatively on the CASA cause. In choosing your words or content, imagine CASA staff, your family and all parties on your CASA case are reading everything you post.

*In #8 and #9 above, CASA only wishes to raise awareness of these issues. We believe this is an area in which our staff, volunteers and supporters should be aware of possible risk and try to inform themselves, but we are not offering any legal advice on these matters.*

**Positive Social Media Examples:** These sample posts tell the CASA story without revealing confidential information about cases.

- Had a blast hanging out with the kids I serve as a CASA volunteer at Chuck E Cheese's. ESPECIALLY, the go-carts, which we did over and over. So much fun! #awesome
- Great day at court as a CASA volunteer! Can't believe what a difference one adult can make to a child. Learn more- <http://www.texascasa.org>
- Happy to have played a part in an awesome adoption & help kids have a good future. Become a CASA volunteer - <http://www.BecomeACASA.org> (This could also be about a family reunification, etc.)
- Do it!! CASA Superhero Run Sept 15?! Come support CASA volunteers so we can help more children in need. <http://www.casasuperherorun.com>
- Helped the kids I serve as a CASA volunteer get the school supplies & clothes they needed for a great start to school this year. I'm rooting for their success! #superstars

**Negative Social Media Examples:** These sample posts either reveal too much information about a case or take a stance that could be damaging to future CASA relationships.

- Great day in court as a CASA volunteer. I was the only one up there who knew the child well and was able to help get the judge to make a good recommendation.
- Finally the judge ruled correctly on my CASA case! So happy to see the kids I serve get to a happy home. Now they are free of drug-addicted parents.
- Had a blast yesterday with the 10-year-old kid on my CASA case at Chuck E Cheese's. He loved the go-carts, which we did over and over. So much fun!
- I'm a proud CASA volunteer! Just attended the Reagan High School graduation of the teen boy I advocate for.

## E. Digital and Social Media Communication Guidelines for Casework Purposes

It is always important to keep confidentiality in mind when communicating digitally about your CASA case. You should be the only person who has access to the means by which you communicate with or about youth on your case in order to protect this confidentiality.

Issues that could affect this include:

- Avoid using shared email accounts accessible by another family member or friend for your casework.
- Delete any case photos that sync from your phone to a shared device (tablet, computer, etc).
- Be conscious of family or group phone plans that sync email, text messaging, and photos across multiple devices.
- Ensure your mobile devices and social media accounts are secure so that others don't have access to your communications with or about youth.

**On some cases, especially with older youth, social media tools like Facebook and Instagram may be the only way a youth will communicate with an advocate or could be a means of gathering crucial information about a youth who is missing or a family member who may not be telling the truth about a situation. As an advocate you must keep in mind confidentiality, privacy and maintaining appropriate boundaries, so if you need to use any online or social media tool in your casework, here are some important guidelines:**

1. Before using social media, evaluate whether or not it is a necessary tool for communication with the youth you're appointed to and **consult with your Supervisor before making any decisions. Using social media to communicate with youth should be a last resort.**
  - a. Keep in mind that typically social networks try to limit usage to only youth who are 13 years or older.
2. If deemed necessary, you should only connect online with the youth you're appointed to. **Do not connect with family members or other parties connected to the CPS case**, even if you're unable to see information on their profile you would like to view.
  - a. Do not create any pseudonym accounts to attempt to gain greater access to someone on the case to gather more information about them.
3. **Only use direct/private messaging** to communicate with anyone involved in a case.

- a. Never publicly post to a youth or family members' wall or comment on a post. Do not tweet at a youth or family member. Do not tag a youth or family member in any of your posts.
  - b. Never publicly mention meeting locations/dates/times.
4. **Your private/direct messages with a youth via social media are part of case record and should be documented and shared with your Supervisor.**
- a. It is important to copy and paste all conversations via social media into Optima.
  - b. Please enter these conversations into the Contact Logs under Activity Type: Child Contact: Social Media.
5. Keep your own privacy in mind.
- a. Create segmented CASA lists for the youth you serve and limit their ability to see any of your personal information or posts (especially on Facebook and Instagram).
  - b. Review your privacy settings to ensure that your CASA list and the general public (which could include family members and others you're not connected to at all) cannot see any of your personal information or posts.
  - c. If you need to use Twitter or Instagram on a case, consider creating a separate profile just for CASA work that you don't actually post any personal information or photos to.
  - d. Hide any friends/followers lists that include CASA contacts from your public profile.
6. Never share confidential information over social media, even if using private messaging.
7. Never use any location-sharing social media tools (e.g., Facebook Check-Ins) when working on a CASA case.
8. Finally, when the case ends and you say goodbye to the youth you are serving, it is important to end any online connections including un-friending on Facebook, un-following on Instagram, etc.

## **7. CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

It is important to avoid any conflict of interest that may arise on a case to which an advocate is assigned. The relationships that are established with case parties need to be treated with the utmost professionalism. A volunteer is considered by other case parties as

a paraprofessional on the case. This requires the volunteer to act as a professional throughout the life of the case.

The following policy should be followed when a conflict of interest exists:

- **Personal:** An advocate taking a personal role in a CPS case involving a friend or family member - e.g., acting as a character witness or placement option in another CPS case. An advocate should make a choice between their CASA case and the other CPS case. If the advocate chooses to continue with the CASA case they should not have any contact with any of the professionals on the other case. As well, they should not go to court or any other official meeting related to the other case. An advocate also cannot be related to any party on the case to which you are assigned.
- **Professional:** An advocate has dual professional roles on the same case - e.g., serving as the advocate and the classroom teacher for the same child. The advocate should not accept that case or should resign the case as soon as the conflict becomes apparent. This specifically includes but is not limited to acting as a foster parent to any child in the conservatorship of CPS or acting as an adoptive placement to any child in the conservatorship of CPS.
- **Endorsements:** An advocate using their Court Appointed Special Advocate status to endorse a political candidate, product, program or service. Using CASA status for anything other than promoting the CASA program or serving as an advocate for a child is considered a conflict of interest and is strictly prohibited.

The advocate should immediately notify their Supervisor if they become aware of any situation that has the potential to create a conflict of interest with a CASA case.

## 8. HARASSMENT

CASA is committed to maintaining high standards of professional conduct in the volunteer experience. In keeping with this commitment, we prohibit any form of harassment, which would have the effect of creating a threatening, uncomfortable, or hostile environment. CASA categorizes any unwelcome conduct or discriminatory behavior based on a person being in a protected class (e.g., gender, ethnicity, sexual preference) as harassment. Examples of behavior that might be considered unwelcome include jokes, slurs and offensive emails.

It is the responsibility of all advocates to conduct themselves in a manner conducive to creating a harmonious environment that is free of sexual or otherwise unlawful harassment and intimidation. Each advocate will be held individually responsible for their acts of sexual or otherwise unlawful harassment while conducting their responsibilities for CASA of Your County.

CASA also recognizes that our advocates could become victims of harassment by an individual outside of CASA but connected to the advocate's case work. It is the responsibility of each volunteer to inform their Supervisor (who will inform the Executive Director) if the volunteer believes they are being harassed by any other individual connected to their case work.

Immediate and appropriate disciplinary action will be taken in response to any incident of harassment. CASA will not retaliate against anyone for a good faith claim of harassment.

## **9. ABUSE BETWEEN CHILDREN**

CASA will not allow the mistreatment, bullying (including cyber bullying), or abuse of one child by another child. Any volunteer who observes or learns of the mistreatment, bullying (including cyber bullying) or abuse of one child by another should immediately notify their Supervisor. These incidents will be documented and reported to the Child Abuse Hotline, as appropriate. As a reminder, if any staff member, volunteer or board member has reason to believe a child has been mistreated or has reason to believe that a child is in imminent danger, that person has an obligation to comply with the Texas Family Code 261.101 regarding the requirement to report child abuse and neglect.

Child abuse can be reported to TDFPS at 1.800.252.5400.

## **10. ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

By initialing each segment below, I acknowledge that I have read and fully understand the Code of Conduct as well as CASA of Your County's policies governing expectations and prohibitions of advocates, both volunteers and employees:

### **Code of Conduct**

\_\_\_\_\_ Mission, Vision, Values and Ethics Statements

### **Program Policies**

\_\_\_\_\_ Minimum Expectations of Service to a Case and Best Practice Recommendations

\_\_\_\_\_ Advocate-Child Relationship

\_\_\_\_\_ Safe and Drug-Free Workplace Policy

\_\_\_\_\_ Case Closure

\_\_\_\_\_ Confidentiality

\_\_\_\_\_ Communication

\_\_\_\_\_ Conflict of Interest

\_\_\_\_\_ Harassment

\_\_\_\_\_ Abuse Between Children

Further, I agree to execute my duties in strict accordance with these policies.

I declare that I have not perpetrated physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, or neglect against a child or an adult and that I have never been accused of these acts.

I understand that CASA of Your County's policies are subject to change at any time.

I understand that if changes occur, CASA will notify me via electronic communication at the email address that I provide to them and that revisions and policy changes will also be available on the CASA website.

I understand that it is my responsibility to stay informed and in compliance with current and future policies of CASA of Your County.

It is my clear understanding that if I violate CASA of Your County's policies, current or as they may be revised in the future, I am subject to the immediate termination of my relationship with this organization.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



## SAMPLE ADVOCATE JOB DESCRIPTION

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A CASA volunteer is a court-appointed, trained and committed adult who ensures that each child's individual needs remain a priority in an overburdened child welfare system. They get to know the child while also gathering information from the child's family, teachers, doctors, therapists, caregivers, and anyone else involved in the child's life to make independent and informed recommendations to help the judge decide what's best for the child.

### Supervision

CASA volunteers are paired with a staff professional who supports and guides them every step of the way. This includes preparing for and attending case-related hearings and meetings and guiding the volunteer to pertinent resources specific to each case. The different CASA programs call this professional by a variety of titles, such as advocate supervisor, advocate coordinator, case supervisor and coach supervisor. When the staff professional who is there to guide them is not available for a meeting or hearing, another CASA staff member will attend to support the volunteer.

### Responsibilities

#### Investigation:

- Obtain a clear first-hand understanding of the needs and situation of the child(ren).
- Meet the child(ren) within 30 days of starting the case.
- Throughout the case, meet in person with the child(ren) within the timeframe required by your program.
- Review all relevant documents and records.
- Talk with the parents, relatives, social workers, teachers, doctors, therapists, and other persons with significant knowledge of the child(ren) to determine the facts and circumstances of the child(ren).

#### Facilitation:

- Communicate with the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) caseworker after appointment and at least one time per month for the duration of the case.
- Participate in all scheduled case-related meetings.

- Identify, locate and actively engage the child(ren)'s relatives and fictive kin in the decision-making process, working to maintain or rebuild a lasting family support system that will continue past the closure of the case.
- Seek cooperative solutions by facilitating and maintaining communication with the child(ren)'s parents, family members, attorney ad litem, teachers, doctors, therapists, and other service providers as applicable.
- Inform the court promptly of important developments in the case through appropriate means as determined by court rules and statutes.
- Communicate with your advocate supervisor at least once a month to update records and contact logs in the Optima database and participate together in scheduled case conferences.
- Maintain confidentiality of all issues and records of the case and return all case documents to the CASA program after the case is closed.

### Advocacy:

- Provide written court reports for all permanency and review hearings.
- Appear at all hearings to advocate for the child(ren)'s best interest and permanency.
- Provide testimony when necessary, making recommendations for specific appropriate services for the child(ren) and, when appropriate, for the child(ren)'s family.
- Advocate for the child(ren)'s best interest in the community by interfacing with mental health, medical, legal, educational, and other community systems to assure that child(ren)'s needs in these areas are met.

### Monitoring:

- Continue to meet in person with the child(ren) as required by your program.
- Meet in person with the child(ren)'s primary placement provider in a timely manner after placement occurs and communicate with the placement providers at least once a month thereafter for the duration of the assignment of the child(ren)'s case.
- Monitor implementation of service plans and court orders, assuring the court-ordered services are implemented in a timely manner and that review hearings are held in accordance with the law.
- Determine if a Permanency Plan, an educational passport, and a medical passport have been created for the child(ren).

### **Training:**

Volunteers must finish all training requirements within the time frame established by your program, and all background checks must be completed and cleared to be assigned to a case. Volunteers are also asked to complete 12 hours of Continuing Education each year.

### **Commitment:**

CASA volunteers commit to spending 15–20 hours per month for the duration of one specific case (17 months on average). A volunteer's commitment to seeing a case through until it closes ensures a consistent, reliable adult in a child's life and a better chance for the child to reach a safe, permanent home.

### **Requirements:**

- Volunteers must be at least 21 years of age and be able to pass extensive reference, Child Protective Services, sex offender registry, and criminal background checks before becoming a CASA volunteer.
- Volunteers should have effective oral and written communication skills and be comfortable with computer technology, including email and word processing.
- Volunteers may not be a current foster parent or be in the process of adopting a child from Child Protective Services.
- If the volunteer is an attorney, they may not concurrently be appointed to any cases involving Child Protective Services in the county in which they are serving.





