



CASA of Santa Cruz County 2015-2019 STRATEGIC PLAN

Mission:

CASA is a child's voice in Dependency Court, providing advocacy, stability, and hope to children who have been abused, neglected, or abandoned.

What we do:

CASA empowers volunteers to directly influence life-changing decisions affecting children in foster care. To accomplish this, CASA recruits, screens, trains, and supervises Volunteer Advocates who work one-on-one with children and youth in the dependency care system, advocating for their best interests in court, in school, and in the community.

Trained and supervised by CASA's staff of professionals, Volunteer Advocates become sworn officers of the court before being carefully matched with a child. The Advocate's role is to:

1. Be a trusted support for a child or youth. In a sea of ever-changing faces, the CASA volunteer is often a key person who can be counted on.
2. Investigate, identify, and inform the Court and other child welfare professionals of the needs, desires, and progress of their child/youth.
3. Advocate for the child's or youth's social, emotional, educational, and permanency needs and ensures that they are met (promptly and fully) through appropriate social services, educational support, and by accessing other community resources.
4. Monitor the progress of CASA children and youth, building a close connection through weekly visits and offering consistent, caring support for the duration of their time in the system.

Background and History of CASA of Santa Cruz County:

Each year in Santa Cruz County, over 500 children enter the foster care system due to abuse or neglect. For some, their time in the system is short and they return home or find homes with relatives or friends, often enabling them to maintain their school placements and familiar connections.

For the majority, however, uncertainty and loss become a way of life as they are separated not only from parents but from siblings, friends, neighbors, teachers, pets, and other familiar comforts. The support and encouragement of a CASA Advocate has been shown to make a positive and powerful difference for children during their time in the system and beyond.

CASA of Santa Cruz County was founded in 1992 after a particularly tragic case of child abuse fell through the cracks of the overburdened child welfare system. CASA's proven model of effective one-on-one advocacy was developed in the late 1970s in Seattle and has since grown into a network of over 1,000 CASA organizations nationwide. In 1993, CASA of Santa Cruz County launched its first class of fifteen trained Advocates.

Now, in 2014, 22 years later, over 1200 Advocates have brought caring friendship and powerful advocacy to more than 1,900 children in Santa Cruz County.

In 2009, CASA's expanding services and ongoing growth enabled us to begin pursuing a permanent home: "*a casa for CASA.*" We purchased a home in Watsonville and renovated it with the help of

donations and volunteer labor. Thanks to the generous support of our community, by June of 2011, we completed our Capital Campaign goal of pledges of \$1.5 million. In the fall of 2010, CASA's Richard and Mary Solari House opened its doors, providing a home-like environment where Advocates can bring children to play, study, cook, engage in crafts, and celebrate birthdays and holidays. It also provides space for the staff to work and to hold meetings and other functions. CASA of Santa Cruz County is nearly unique (one of only three of over 1,000 CASA organizations nationwide) in having such a home which stands as a veritable landmark of our community's commitment to serving children in foster care.

The 2015-2019 Strategic Plan Introduction

The Environment and Recent Changes in Foster Care

In the early years of CASA's existence, our advocacy officially terminated when the youth we served emancipated from the child welfare system at eighteen years of age. We have always recognized the transition years (approximately fourteen to twenty-one years of age, and even beyond) as a critical window for youth and young adults to develop skills, access resources, pursue employment and or educational opportunities and make healthy connections in the community; all necessary for successful, independent living as adults. We have stretched our resources and broadened the scope of our program to support these "transition age youth." The 2012 enactment of California's legislation called AB 12, which extends benefits of foster care up to age 21 has empowered our efforts and resolve to advocate for older youths as they enter adulthood.

Furthermore, CASA of Santa Cruz County has been a strong proponent of educational advocacy, with many of our advocates holding "educational rights" for the children they serve. In 2012, we began partnering with Foster Ed, a pilot program that aims to provide all foster children and youth with educational champions. This collaboration coincided with the publication of an extensive, first-time study on the academic achievements of children in foster care in California. This study concluded that foster children represent a high-risk subgroup, distinct from other at-risk groups and one that is consistently lowest in academic achievement.

These developments have influenced our visions for the future of CASA of Santa Cruz County. Our strategic plan reflects our desires to improve our advocacy around older youth, particularly transition-age youth, improve educational advocacy and outcome while improving the quality of our program and increasing our capacity to serve more children and youth in foster care and beyond.

Our Process

CASA began its strategic planning with a staff retreat in December 2013, followed by a staff and board retreat in February 2014. There we laid out the process, established a timeline and brainstormed visions for the future of CASA. A Strategic Planning committee comprised of eight board members (one emeritus) and five staff was established to carry out the draft of a plan.

Our first task was to design a survey that allowed us to test the viability of our visions with our volunteers, partners, stakeholders and clients. We felt that by including these important groups in our process, we could gain support and information that would allow us to develop a stronger strategic plan. Surveys were completed by 119 respondents (67 advocates, 10 youth, 13 donors, 5 Friends of CASA, and 24 partnering organizations and elected officials).

Many of the surveys were conducted in person, by staff and board members, resulting in valuable feedback which greatly helped to inform the direction of our strategic plan. We feel these meetings strengthened alliances and planted seeds for future collaborations and, furthermore, generated community-wide support for the directions our visions were taking us. Analysis of the survey data, allowed us to refine our visions. Subgroups of the SP Committee then worked to formulate the goals, objectives and strategies for each vision. In September 2014, each vision subgroup brought their respective goals, objectives and strategies to the table and we worked to piece them together into a cohesive document that we could then take to the full board for approval. Our process was collaborative and inclusive with administration, staff and board working together to develop a strategic plan we hope will guide our progress over the next five years. The result of this work follows as our Visions for the future and the outline of the goals, objectives and strategies to realize those visions. A separate "work plan" will be developed each year by the staff and reviewed each year by the staff and the board to ensure our progress toward realizing our 5-year Visions.

CASA Strategic Plan Visions

Vision #1

CASA children and youth are safe, happy, healthy and thriving.

GOALS:

1. All children and youth who need an Advocate get one immediately.
2. CASA children and youth have safe and permanent homes.
3. CASA children and youth are emotionally, socially and physically healthy.

GOAL 1: All children and youth who need an Advocate get one immediately.

***Objective 1:** 100% of children referred are assigned to an Advocate within 30 days.*

Strategy 1: After analysis, initiate process and resources needed to increase the percentage of children served.

Strategy 2: Define and initiate process needed to ensure Advocates are assigned within 30 days.

***Objective 2:** CASA effectively serves children and youth ages 0-21.*

Strategy 1: Identify needs and requirements and implement programs for serving the full spectrum of children from ages 0 to 21.

***Objective 3:** CASA has a waiting list of diverse, culturally competent Advocates.*

Strategy 1: Recruit, train and retain Advocates to eliminate the waiting list of children and youth.

Strategy 2: Match Advocates to best support the unique needs of the children referred.

GOAL 2: CASA children and youth have safe and permanent homes.

***Objective 1:** CASA plays a significant role in ensuring children and youth achieve permanency.*

Strategy 1: Effectively collaborate with all partners who influence permanent placements and reunification.

Strategy 2: All advocates develop and utilize the skills and knowledge of permanency best practices.

GOAL 3: CASA children and youth are emotionally, socially and physically healthy.

***Objective 1:** Advocates have the information and resources needed to ensure the children and youth's well-being.*

Strategy 1: CASA researches and defines factors that indicate emotional, social and physical health.

Strategy 2: CASA provides training, coaching and resources to Advocates.

***Objective 2:** CASA has strong collaborative relationships with partners who influence children and youth's well-being.*

Strategy 1: Assess current status of collaborative relationships and develop a plan and process for strengthening them.

Vision #2

CASA children and youth achieve educational success; CASA is a leader in promoting educational success for all children and youth in the dependency care system.

GOALS:

- 1. Advocates have the knowledge and skills to support children and youth's educational success.**
- 2. CASA children and youth are on track to graduate from high school.**
- 3. CASA and the community sustain the mission of FosterEd.**

GOAL 1: Advocates have the knowledge and skills to support children and youth's educational success.

***Objective 1:** CASA Advocates have knowledge and skills about schools, the educational system and special education to support their child/youth.*

Strategy 1: Provide training to give Advocates the necessary knowledge and skills.

Strategy 2: Provide coaching and support to Advocates on individual cases.

GOAL 2: CASA children and youth are on track to graduate from high school and are prepared for work or post-secondary education.

***Objective 1:** CASA children and youth have an educational advocacy plan and champion.*

Strategy 1: Advocates work with FosterEd and the Social Worker to coordinate the Educational Advocacy Plan with FosterEd's Educational Plan.

***Objective 2:** CASA addresses the needs of infants to preschool-age children and determines their language skills and preschool readiness.*

Strategy 1: Educate the CASA community, staff and partners about the critical importance of addressing this need and serving this population.

Strategy 2: Provide specialized training to Advocates and staff who serve this population.

Objective 3: Children in grades K-12 are working at grade level.

Strategy 1: Advocates work with the school to assess educational needs, level, and progress.

Objective 4: CASA children and youth remain in their school of origin if it's in the best interest of the child.

Strategy 1: Train and coach Advocates and caregivers on the child's right to remain in their school.

Strategy 2: Collaborate with the court, social workers, schools and partners regarding the school of origin rights of CASA children and youth.

GOAL 3: CASA collaborates with community partners to ensure that all CASA children and youth receive the educational support they need.

Objective 1: CASA works with all the partners of FosterEd to sustain the FosterEd model in our county.

Strategy 1: Determine and define our role and the resources necessary.

Objective 2: Every school and educational partner understands the CASA's role and the legal rights of children and youth in foster care.

Strategy 1: Develop clear and concise messaging and communications for schools and educational partners.

Vision #3

CASA transition-age youth and young adults have the life skills and knowledge to be successful adults.

GOALS:

- 1. CASA youth have the life skills that will enable them to live independently.**
- 2. Advocates successfully transition from advocacy to mentorship roles.**

GOAL 1: CASA youth have the life skills that will enable them to live independently.

***Objective 1:** CASA youth are in stable and safe living environments.*

Strategy1: Facilitate access to housing resources.

***Objective 2:** CASA young adults are engaged in post-secondary education.*

Strategy 1: Facilitate access to community and financial resources.

***Objective 3:** CASA young adults are employed and have a career plan.*

Strategy 1: Help youth build work experience and facilitate job hunting skills/resources.

Strategy 2: Explore resources to serve CASA youth beyond age 21.

***Objective 4:** CASA young adults have lifelong healthy connections.*

Strategy 1: Identify resources and people who will remain in a CASA youth's life.

Strategy 2: Ensure resources to address psychological, physical and mental health needs for lifelong healthy connections.

GOAL 2: Advocates successfully transition from advocacy to mentorship roles.

***Objective 1:** Advocates have the skills and abilities to be effective mentors.*

Strategy 1: Provide mentorship training, coaching and supervision.

Vision #4

CASA has reliable organizational and financial resources.

GOALS:

- 1. CASA has the organizational infrastructure and human resources necessary to implement the Strategic Plan.*
- 2. CASA has the financial resources and expertise to fully support the Strategic Plan.*

GOAL 1: CASA has the organizational infrastructure and human resources necessary to implement the Strategic Plan.

***Objective 1:** Ensure CASA has the organizational structure to meet program, staffing and volunteer requirements.*

Strategy 1: Conduct a needs analysis for staffing and resources to meet goals.

Strategy 2: Develop staffing plan and structure to meet the SP.

Strategy 3: Evaluate physical site issues required to meet SP Goals.

***Objective 2:** Ensure optimal use of volunteers as a resource to the organization.*

Strategy 1: Determine volunteer needs across sectors of the organization including Board and Advocates and recruit and develop them accordingly.

Strategy 2: Enhance/expand use of non-advocate volunteers in Program to provide additional opportunities for former Advocates (e.g. peer supervisors, specialists, house volunteers.)

GOAL 2: CASA has the financial resources and expertise to fully support the Strategic Plan.

***Objective 1:** CASA ensures appropriate financial planning and oversight.*

Strategy 1: Ensure structure for implementing best practices for financial management in non-profit organizations.

Strategy 2: Develop budgets and forecast(s) to meet the SP.

Objective 2: CASA has a fund development plan to meet the financial needs of the organization.

Strategy 1: Board and staff work together annually to create a plan to meet budget and revenue goals.)

Strategy 2: Identify, cultivate, solicit and steward current and futures sources of revenue.

Objective 3: CASA has the technology resources to implement the Strategic Plan and to achieve organizational excellence.

Strategy 1: Identify and implement CASA's technology needs with an initial focus on implementing the Strategic Plan and achieving organizational excellence.

Vision #5

CASA's mission and the needs of foster children and youth are well-understood and broadly supported throughout Santa Cruz County.

GOALS:

1. The community understands the needs of foster children and youth and its role in meeting those needs.
2. The community understands CASA's mission and the impact we have in the community.

GOAL 1: The community has an understanding of the needs of foster children and youth and its role in meeting those needs.

Objective 1: CASA educates and informs the community about the needs of foster children and youth in Santa Cruz County.

GOAL 2: The community understands CASA's mission and the impact we have in the community.

Objective 1: Educate the community about CASA and its mission.

Strategy 1: CASA develops clear and concise messaging, marketing and communications to educate the community.

Objective 2: Recruit, engage and retain community members in all aspects of CASA's work.

Strategy 1: CASA develops an outreach strategy to engage and educate the community and enlist and retain volunteers.

Objective 3: Reach out to underrepresented groups to encourage participation in all areas of CASA's work.

Strategy 1: CASA develops targeted messaging and outreach to ensure cultural competency in serving our children, youth, and the community.