



Strategic Plan Update 2024- 2026

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

CASA OF SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

Each year in Santa Cruz County, hundreds of children and youth enter the juvenile court system. Some are in the dependency system, sometimes referred to as the foster care system, due to abuse or neglect. And others are under the juvenile justice system, due to law offenses. For all the children and youth that we serve, uncertainty and loss may become a way of life. While some may remain with family members during their time in the system others must be removed from their homes or incarcerated, separated not only from their parents but from siblings, friends, neighbors, teachers, pets, and other familiar comforts. Still others are infants whose parents benefit from the support of an Advocate in providing the care and nurturing so vital to development at the earliest stages of life.

Our mission is to be there for each and every one of them.

CASA advocates for children and youth, providing volunteers so each child in the dependency and juvenile court system feels cared for and connected with the people, families, and resources they need to be able to define their lives in strength, resiliency and social justice.

CASA recruits, trains, and matches volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocates (referred to as “Advocates” throughout) 1:1 with babies, children and youth under the jurisdiction of the juvenile court system. Advocates provide children with support through this difficult journey, with an emphasis

on ensuring that their voice is heard in court. Children and youth also get to know their Advocate as a person they can rely on, someone they trust to have their best interests at heart. The support and encouragement of an Advocate has been shown to make a positive and powerful difference for children during their time in the system and beyond.

CASA recruits, screens, trains, and supervises Advocates matched with babies, children and youth in the dependency care system and youth in the juvenile justice system, advocating for their best interests in court, at home, in school, and in the community.

With this new plan, we are prioritizing 3 areas:

1. Serving more youth
2. Deepening our impact
3. Centering social justice in all that we do.

We are well positioned to do this, and we are called by our community and the families we serve to do this.

Advocacy is made possible through the generosity of volunteers who undergo many hours of training and education to prepare for their role. Advocates bring diverse strengths and gifts to their role, helping children and often their families in navigating complex systems and challenging circumstances. Each of these children or youth has specific strengths and needs, and their experiences of the system differ greatly.



CASA of Santa Cruz County (referred to as “CASA” throughout) is supported by individual donations and by grants. CASA belongs to a network of over 939 CASA organizations at the state and national levels.

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

CASA's model of one-on-one advocacy for vulnerable children was developed in 1977 in Seattle, Washington, and has since grown into a network of 939 CASA organizations across 49 states.

CASA of Santa Cruz County was founded in 1992 in response to the need to better safeguard the wellbeing of children and youth in the dependency system, advocating for increased effectiveness through transparency, responsiveness, and accountability across the child welfare system. In 1993, CASA of Santa Cruz County launched its first class of 15 trained Advocates. Many of those first Advocates have played a crucial role in CASA's history—becoming Board members, Auxiliary members and long-standing advocates for the mission of CASA.

By 2008, CASA's expanding services and continuing growth enabled the organization to begin seeking a permanent home: “a casa for CASA.” In 2010, CASA's Richard and Mary Solari House opened its doors, providing a home-like environment where Advocates bring children to play, study, cook, enjoy crafts, and celebrate birthdays and holidays. It also provides a workspace for staff, accommodates trainings, and gatherings, and hosts Advocate and youth activities.

CASA continually seeks to serve those most in need of advocacy and connection. In 2012, CASA began serving transition-age youth (TAY) in the often-difficult transition from child dependency services to adult systems of care. In 2015, CASA further expanded its services to include infants and

children in need of specialized early childhood advocacy. Working with the youngest children and their families provides an “upstream” intervention that can create positive differences for children throughout their lives. In 2018, CASA served 66% of the dependent children and youth in Santa Cruz county's dependency court system. In 2020, CASA began offering an Advocate to every youth in the dependency system, serving all youth who needed an Advocate. This has continued, and in 2023, 83% of the babies, children and youth in the dependency system in Santa Cruz county were matched with an Advocate.

In 2019, CASA made the bold decision to join a pilot project to serve youth who are justice-involved. In California, youth on probation are served by the same court system as those who have been abused. Children in the juvenile justice system suffer many of the same hardships as youth in the dependency system, yet few CASA programs serve youth in the juvenile justice system. Knowing this, CASA's Board of Directors decided not only to serve youth who are justice involved but also to join a study to establish whether CASA Advocates were beneficial to youth who are justice involved. In 2023 the study results were released, and it was firmly established that justice involved youth benefitted from having an Advocate.

In 2023, the Board changed the mission of CASA to include serving youth who were juvenile justice involved and CASA's second core program—the juvenile justice program—was launched. By the end of 2023, the program had 3 staff and 15% of the youth served at CASA were justice involved.

County & Community Profile

Santa Cruz County is on the central coast of California. In 2020, the population was 270,861 people including an estimated 29,671 households

with children.¹ Almost 4% of those families live below the poverty line. In 2023, approximately 41% of the population was Hispanic/Latino. Santa Cruz county struggles with disproportionality as approximately 50% of the youth in dependency care were Latino and 75% of the youth on probation were Latino.

Children and Youth in Court Systems

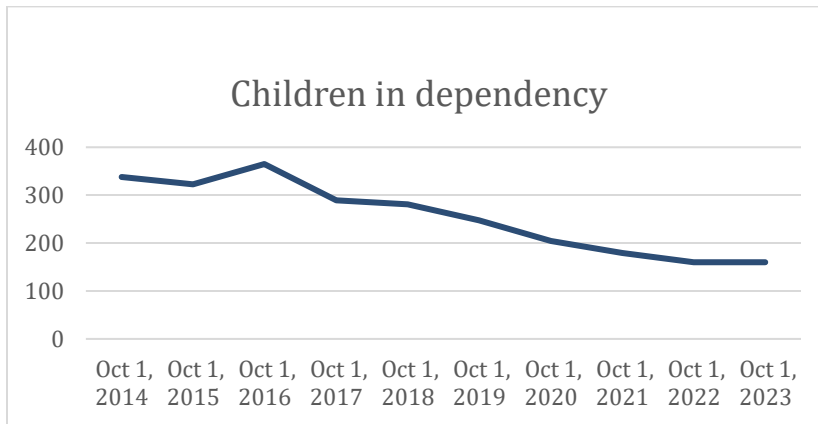
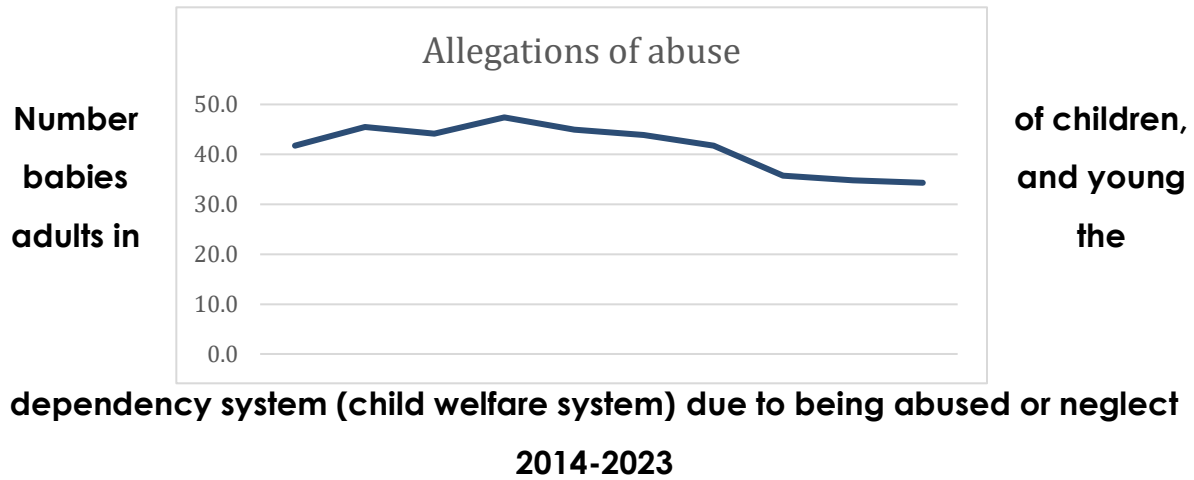
It is our vision that all children are nurtured in the hearts and homes of safe and loving families, but we understand this is not the reality. We know that we are part of a community where systemic injustices exist—such as racism, classism, and sexism—which create and perpetuate conditions that lead to children and youth being unsafe in their homes. We know that these systemic injustices create poverty and that due to biases, our society believes that families who live in poverty are unsafe which results in over policing and over removal of children in marginalized communities.

When data are disaggregated by race and ethnicity, there are disproportionate rates of abuse, neglect, and system-involvement at national, state, and county levels, due to inequities within broader social, economic, and political systems. CASA works for equitable outcomes for children within the court system. For this reason, CASA is re-committing to social justice both within the organization, our larger community, and the juvenile dependency and justice systems.

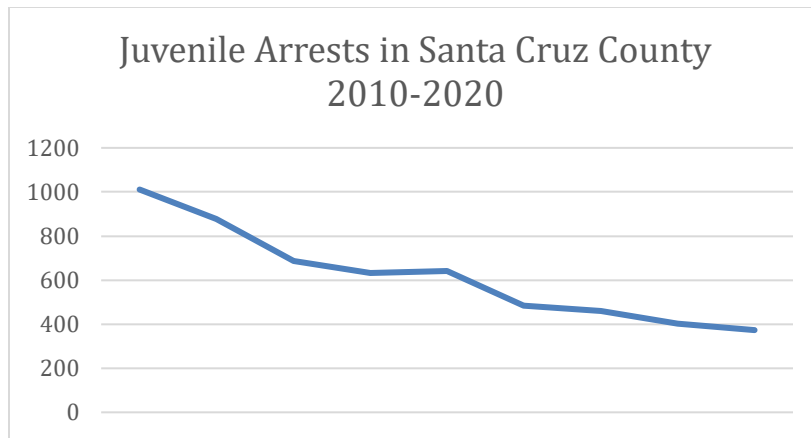
As our community accepts these facts and works to develop better systems, the number of youths under the jurisdiction of the juvenile court system declines year upon year and has been doing so since 2010.

¹ DataShare Santa Cruz County

Allegations of abuse per 1,000 2014-2023



The Juvenile Probation department of Santa Cruz County also continues to move resources into prevention to decrease the number of youth on probation.



THE PLANNING PROCESS

In 2023, CASA leadership and board decided to update our 2020-2025 strategic plan to reflect our developing work in Juvenile Justice, our strong commitment to deepening our impact and infusing the principles of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) into our work. This update is based upon and furthers the strategic plan we were undertaking until 2025.

STRATEGIC PLAN

Our Mission

CASA of Santa Cruz advocates for children and youth, providing court appointed volunteers so each child in the dependency and juvenile court system feels cared for and connected with the people, families and resources they need to heal and flourish into adulthood.



Our Vision

Our vision is that all children are nurtured in the hearts and homes of safe and loving families.

Our Core Values

CASA of Santa Cruz County upholds the following core values:

- **Opportunity.** We work to empower children and youth so that they flourish as they experience self-growth, and healing.
- **Compassion** We seek to create safe spaces of authenticity to join together in caring connection.
- **Comunidad.** We strive to be led by the families and youth who have been under the jurisdiction of the court as we come together with all members of our community to empower healthy and thriving families and childhoods.
- **Justice.** At CASA we are committed to equity, leveling power differences and empowering our community.

GOALS

By 2025, the following goals will be accomplished:

- 1) CASA of Santa Cruz will offer innovative, equitable services to every baby, child and youth who is a dependent of the court and double the number of youths we support in the juvenile justice system.
- 2) We will deepen our impact through a data-driven quality improvement process.
- 3) We will be driven by a need to increase equity, especially racial equity, and will center the voices and experiences of those who have

been under the jurisdiction of the juvenile court in our practice and policy development.

OBJECTIVES

For each goal, several SMART (specific, measurable, actionable, relevant, and time-bound) objectives have been identified. CASA's leadership team will review objectives annually to consider whether adjustments or changes are needed to the plan. Results of this review will also be shared with the Board.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Goal 1. CASA of Santa Cruz will offer innovative, equitable services to every baby, child and youth who is a dependent of the court and double the number of youths we support in the juvenile justice system.

Goal 1 Objectives:	Target Timing	Lead
A. Offer every youth under the jurisdiction of the dependency court an Advocate	2024	Program Director/Outreach Manager
B. Expand Juvenile Justice program to serve 45 youth at any given time.	2025	Program Director
C. Increase number of available Advocates. Related Steps and Milestones a. Increase volunteers recruited by 20% or higher per year. b. 45% of new youth are served by a returning advocate every year.	2024 (measured annually)	CASA Staff Outreach Manager/Program Director
D. Increase the diversity of Advocates to best serve the babies, children and youth under the jurisdiction of the court. Related Steps and Milestones	2024, (measured continuously) 2025	CASA Staff/Outreach Manager/Communications Director/Program Director

Goal 1 Objectives:	Target Timing	Lead
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Increase percentage of Advocates who are Latinx by a minimum of 5% a year. b. Create social media, outreach, onboarding and training materials in English and Spanish c. Advocate training is accessible to Spanish speakers. 		
E. All youth receive an advocate within 30 days and within equal time frames regardless of age, race, ethnicity, language spoken, geographical location, or legal status.	(Each Year)	Program Director/Outreach Manager
F. Update training materials to ensure that Advocates have the information and skills to provide the best possible services.	2024 ongoing	Program Director
G. CASA will have the resources necessary to fulfill the Strategic Plan. Related Steps and Milestones <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Communication plan is updated annually to support bilingual culture, strategic plan, DEI Plan. b. Fund Development plan is updated annually to support strategic plan and DEI plan. c. Staff retention plan is updated annually in support of DEI plan. d. Create and implement board development plan based on board assessment completed biannually. 	2024 ongoing	Communications and Development Director, CASA staff, Executive Director, CASA Board

GOAL 2: We will deepen our impact through a data driven quality improvement process.



Goal 2 Objectives:	Target Timing	Lead
A. Implement the outcome measurement tool which has been developed. Related Steps and Milestones <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Build database to support data gathering through well-being surveys. b. Train all staff and advocates to implement the surveys. 	2024	Program Director/CASA staff
B. Engage in quality improvement process <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Analyze data from outcomes tool. b. Identify and implement processes to improve targeted outcomes. c. Analyze success of improved processes. 	2025	Program Director, Executive Director

Goal 3. Increase equity, especially racial equity, and center the people, voices, and experiences of those who have been under the jurisdiction of the juvenile court in our practice, program and policy development.

Goal 3 Objectives:	Target Timing	Lead
A. Implement the DEIB plan developed by staff and Board members in 2023.	2024, continuous	ED/DEI committee/CASA Staff/Board
C. Update and implement the Employee Health, Wellbeing and Retention Plan to reflect our commitment to being an organization that promotes belonging, equity and wellbeing for staff.	2024	CASA Staff/Board
B. Be a fully inclusive workplace that is moving towards becoming a belonging organization.	2025	ED/CASA Staff
C. Enhance and formalize the plan for system-level advocacy, enabling the collective voices and needs of CASA children and youth so that they are involved in community, policy decisions, and community program development.	2025	CASA Staff and CASA Board

Goal 3 Objectives:	Target Timing	Lead

