



Strategic Plan 2020-2024

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- CASA Volunteers (Current and Former Advocates)
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- Community Partners
- Friends of CASA
- Court Experts
- Division of Family and Children's Services (DFCS) Social Workers
- FosterEd
- Children's Behavioral Health
- Families & Youth (Via Surveys)

*Denotes Members of the **Strategic Planning Sub-Committee**

CONTENTS

- Introduction 1
 - CASA of Santa Cruz County 1
 - History and Background 2
 - The Planning Process..... 7
- Strategic Plan 8
 - Mission, Vision, and Core Values 8
 - Goals..... 9
 - Key Strategies 9
 - Objectives 12
- Appendix..... 16
 - A. Strategic Planning Dates and Milestones 16

INTRODUCTION

CASA OF SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

Each year in Santa Cruz County, hundreds of children and youth enter the foster care system due to abuse or neglect. For the majority of these children, uncertainty and loss 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, 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.

CASA empowers volunteers to influence **life-changing decisions** affecting children in foster care.

Court Appointed Special Advocates (referred to as “Advocates” throughout) provide children, youth, and families 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 who work with the families of babies and toddlers and with children and youth in the dependency care system, advocating for their best interests in court, at home, in school, and in the community.

Advocacy is made possible through the generosity of volunteers who undergo many hours of training and education to prepare for their role. Advocates in Santa Cruz County serve the needs of infants and toddlers, children, adolescents, and transition-age youth (TAY). Each child or youth has specific strengths and needs, and their experiences differ. Advocates bring diverse strengths and gifts to their role, helping children and often their families in navigating complex systems and challenging circumstances.

CASA of Santa Cruz County (referred to as "CASA" throughout) is supported by individual donations and by grants. CASA of Santa Cruz County belongs to a network of over 950 CASA organizations at the state and national levels, all working to promote court-appointed volunteer advocacy so every child in the United States who has been abused or neglected has the opportunity to thrive in a safe and permanent home.

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 950 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.

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 workspace for staff and accommodates trainings and Advocate support activities.

CASA of Santa Cruz 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.

Planning for this 2020-2024 Strategic Plan began in early 2019 with the goal of building upon CASA's already strong foundation. Guided by this plan over the next five years, CASA will continue seeking new knowledge, finding new resources, and actively engaging its community in improving the lives and futures of Santa Cruz County children and their families.

County and Community Profile

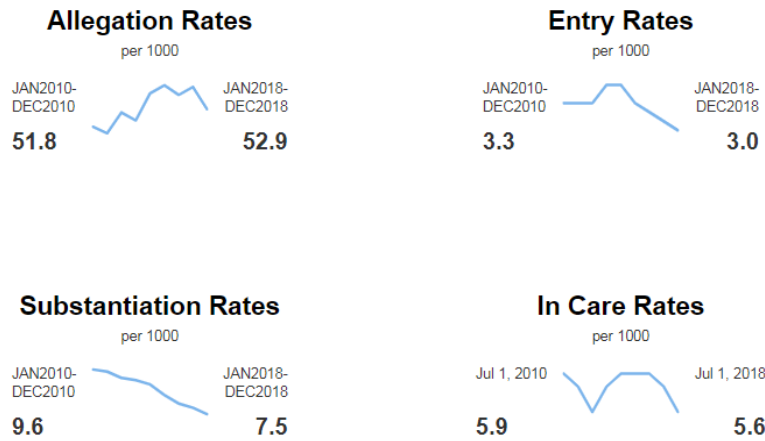
Santa Cruz County is located on the central coast in California. In 2019, the population was estimated at 278,244 people including an estimated 31,047 households with children.¹ Over the last decade, the population of Santa Cruz County has increased moderately with a 6% change between 2010 and 2019. Within the County are the cities of Santa Cruz, Scotts Valley, Capitola, and Watsonville, as well as several unincorporated areas and towns. Santa Cruz has urban areas, open space and parks, and agricultural areas. It borders San Mateo County to the North, Santa Clara County to the east, and Monterey and San Benito Counties to the south.

Children and Youth in Court Systems

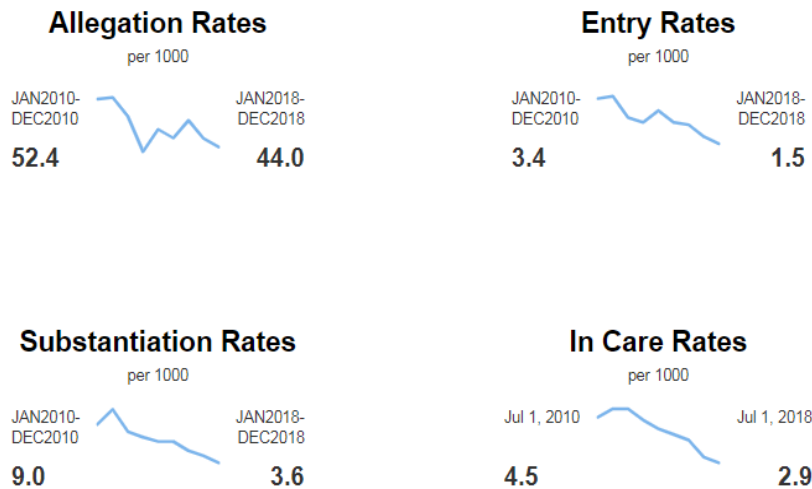
The complete picture of children and youth that are abused and neglected is a difficult number to estimate. Not all allegations of abuse or neglect are substantiated; however, experts also caution that abuse and neglect can go unreported. Measures of substantiated abuse and neglect and foster care placements provide the best information available about need. Overall, rates of allegations, substantiations, foster care entries and placements declined considerably between 2010 and 2018 in Santa Cruz County. When data are disaggregated by race and ethnicity, there are disproportionate rates of abuse, neglect, and foster care at national, state, and county levels, likely due to inequities within broader social, economic, and political systems. CASA works for equitable outcomes for children within the court system.

¹ DataShare Santa Cruz County

Allegations, entries, substantiations, and in-care trends in **California**, 2010-2018²



Allegations, entries, substantiations, and in-care trends in **Santa Cruz County**, 2010-2018²

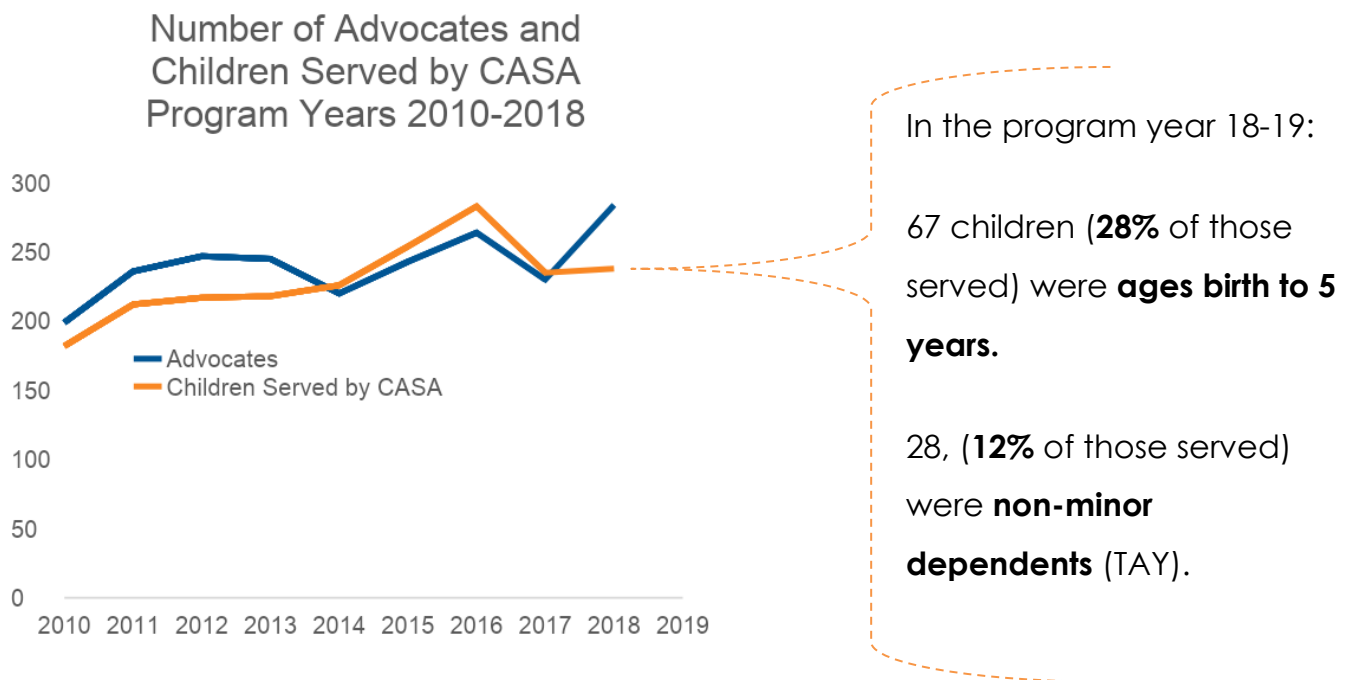


² Data extracted from the California Child Welfare Indicators Project, Center for Social Services Research, University of California at Berkeley, School of Social Welfare.

Advocates in Santa Cruz County

Between 2010 to 2018, CASA increased the number of volunteer Advocates from 199 to 284 (a 43% increase) and during the same period increased the number of children and youth served from 182 to 238 (a 31% increase). Because CASA supports a one-to-one relationship between the Advocate and the child or youth, more Advocates recruited and retained means that more children and youth can be served by the program.

Recently, the number and rate of youth in the dependency system in Santa Cruz County has declined, while CASA of Santa Cruz has been able to increase the number of its trained Advocates. This means that CASA of Santa Cruz has been able to serve an increasing percentage of those in need.



THE PLANNING PROCESS

In December 2018, CASA leadership and board met to outline the process for its new Strategic Plan. A Strategic Planning Subcommittee was formed to provide guidance and oversight of the process prior to full board review. The subcommittee determined that the plan should consider the views and perspectives of people both within and outside of the CASA organization, including current and former Advocates, youth who have been served by Advocates, as well as other stakeholders.

The 2020-2024 Strategic Plan is informed by many sources:

- An analysis of strengths, challenges, opportunities, and threats (*or “SCOT”*) conducted with board and staff
- SCOT analyses of community stakeholders through:
 - Focus Groups
 - Youth Advisory Project (Youth and TAY), Court Partners, and DFCS Social Workers, Foster Ed, Children’s Behavioral Health
 - Town Hall Meetings
 - Board Members (Past and Present), Advocates (Past and Present), Donors and Friends of CASA, and Community Partners
- Family and youth survey results (English and Spanish)
 - Birth Parents, Resource Parents, Youth, and Young Adults
- The current and most recent strategic plans
- Current data on court-involved children and youth
- National CASA guidance regarding planning

With these sources as background, the Strategic Planning Subcommittee conducted multiple [planning sessions](#) from May – September 2019, resulting in a final plan for approval by the CASA Board of Directors.

STRATEGIC PLAN

Our Mission

CASA of Santa Cruz County advocates for children, providing court appointed volunteers so each child in the dependency 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:

- **A**dvocacy. We work to amplify the voices of children and youth to serve their best interests.
- **I**ntegrity. We work to be consistently honest and ethical in all we do.
- **C**ollaboration. We know that outcomes for children, youth, and families are better when we all work together with community partners. Whenever possible, we seek out collaborations to best serve children, youth, and families.
- **E**quity. We commit ourselves and resources to advance equitable opportunities and outcomes for all.

GOALS

By 2024, the following goals will be accomplished:

1. CASA of Santa Cruz County has a sufficient pool of trained, skilled, diverse Advocates, so that more children, youth, and families can benefit from CASA's advocacy and support.
2. CASA of Santa Cruz County has the resources to carry out its Strategic Plan.
3. CASA of Santa Cruz County contributes to positive, equitable outcomes for the children and youth in the court system.

KEY STRATEGIES

Key strategies are overarching approaches to reaching the Strategic Plan goals. CASA of Santa Cruz County will leverage and build upon existing strengths and assets to accomplish plan goals.



Communication and Outreach



Education and Training



Strong Internal Systems



Partnerships and Collaborations



Use of Data to Inform Decision Making



Resource Development



Advocacy at a System Level

Communication and Outreach. CASA of Santa Cruz County recognizes that effective communication, both internally and externally, is a critical factor for success. Board and Staff responsible for implementing the Strategic Plan will use clear and effective communication to achieve plan goals.

Education and Training. Education and training are current strengths of the organization. CASA of Santa Cruz County recognizes the opportunity to build on the organization's extensive culture of learning. CASA works to keep all stakeholders and collaborative partners aware of the issues that impact Advocates and those they serve.

Strong Internal Systems. Effective planning and management are necessary to maintain and enhance internal organizational functions and systems. Through the strategic plan process, effective and reliable internal systems allow CASA to accomplish goals and objectives while minimizing risk for the organization.

Partnerships and Collaborations. Partnerships with other organizations, agencies, and groups help to maximize the reach and impact of the organization. CASA of Santa Cruz will strategically maintain and grow partnerships that help the organization to reach the plan goals in alignment with the mission.

Use of Data to Inform Decision Making. Toward its goals, CASA of Santa Cruz County will continue and strengthen the use of data to help inform the best decisions for children, families, and the organization. Data includes quantitative measures and metrics as well as the qualitative information available from children, youth, and partners.

Resource Development. CASA's mission requires that resources be developed to support the work. These include financial gifts, donations of materials and supplies, staff and volunteers hours, and more. Financial stability and well-being of the organization are critical to the completion of the Strategic Plan goals.

Advocacy at a System Level. CASA of Santa Cruz County works to amplify the voices of children and youth in juvenile systems to advocate for their best interests at a system level. This includes informing the general population about the needs and strengths of children and youth in court systems, and advocating for system changes that will benefit foster children and their families now and into the future.

“CASA is like a family member to some of these kids. I can really [count] on CASA to be on my side to advocate for the child.”

-Family Survey

“My CASA was great. He continues to be a part of my child's life even years after I took guardianship. My teenager actually calls him on his own to plan movie and dinner nights.”

-Family Survey

Goal 1 Objectives:	Target Timing	Lead	Key Strategies
C. Increase the diversity of Advocates to best serve the community Related Steps and Milestones a. Increase financial flexibility to ensure that finances are not an obstacle for qualified Advocates	2024, (measured continuously)	CASA Staff & Board	Communication and Outreach
D. Review and update training materials to ensure that Advocates have the information and skills needed Related Steps and Milestones a. Develop and use a system for regular review of training materials	(Each Year)	Program Director	Education and Training

Goal 2. CASA of Santa Cruz County has the resources to carry out its Strategic Plan.

Goal 2 Objectives:	Target Timing	Lead	Key Strategies
A. Complete a board self-assessment at least every other year Related Steps and Milestones a. Create a board development plan based on board assessment b. Track implementation of the board development plan	2021, 2023	CASA Board	Education and Training
B. Develop a recruitment and retention plan for staff Related Steps and Milestones c. Identify staffing needs through research and review d. Identify any gaps in recruitment or retention strategy (e.g. recruitment, selection, orientation, career development, supervision, recognition, compensation, training, or support) e. Build a recruitment and retention plan to address identified needs	2023	CASA Board	Education and Training
C. Update the fund development plan annually including targets for growth Related Steps and Milestones a. Diversify funding sources	Each year	CASA Development Staff and	Resource Development

Goal 2 Objectives:	Target Timing	Lead	Key Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> b. Expand donor and grant base c. Increase donor retention d. Increase planned giving 			
<p>D. Develop an information and technology (IT) plan to support staff, organization effectiveness, and security of data</p> <p>Related Steps and Milestones</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Assess knowledge management needs and assets in place b. Develop a plan and process to improve prioritized needs c. Select and use appropriate technology and practices that can address the identified needs 	2022	CASA Staff	Strong Internal Resources
<p>E. Update CASA's communication plan annually, including new ways to communicate CASA's mission</p> <p>Related Steps and Milestones</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Clarify or adjust target audiences, key messages, and methods for communication b. Identify timing and leads for communication strategies c. As possible, measure success of communications; continue what is working well d. Make adjustments to improve the plan as needed 	2020-24	CASA Staff	Communication and Outreach
<p>F. Register with the accrediting agency and begin the accreditation process</p> <p>Related Steps and Milestones</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Establish an accreditation workgroup b. Register for process with accrediting body c. Compile existing policies and procedures into manual d. Align risk management plan to accreditation standards 	Submitted and in review by 2024	CASA Staff	Strong Internal Resources

Goal 3. CASA of Santa Cruz County contributes to positive, equitable outcomes for the children and youth in the court system.

Goal 3 Objectives:	Target Timing	Lead	Key Strategies
<p>A. Enhance the system for gathering and tracking performance metrics and outcomes</p> <p>Related Steps and Milestones</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Develop a plan that identifies key performance and outcome measures b. Put into place one or more specialized metrics to reflect the ages and stages of children and youth served c. Document a measurement plan and related procedures to collect and review data d. Explore opportunities for longitudinal evaluation of children and youth post-dismissal 	2021	CASA Staff	Use of Data to Inform Decision Making
<p>B. Enhance and formalize the plan for system-level advocacy, amplifying the collective voices and needs of CASA children and youth so that they are considered in community and policy decisions</p> <p>Related Steps and Milestones</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Assign staff liaison to stay abreast of state and federal policy changes; liaison also will share and communicate with staff and board on key issues b. Set up an internal system for understanding and communicating policy changes c. Communicate the needs of CASA children and youth to help inform local and state policy and practices 	2020	CASA Staff and CASA Board	Advocacy at a System Level Education and Training
<p>C. Start and complete juvenile justice pilot</p> <p>Related Steps and Milestones</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Strengthen understanding of needs among this population b. Support and advocate for positive outcomes for youth in juvenile justice systems c. Evaluate the pilot for the potential to continue/expand 	2022	ED and Program Director	Partnerships and

APPENDIX

A. Strategic Planning Dates and Milestones

Milestone & Date	Description
Complete Pre-Planning & Outreach (April 30)	Community Outreach Complete; Environmental Scan Drafted
Kickoff Meeting (June 10, 2019)	Kickoff Project, Identify Priorities
Milestone # 1 (July 1, 2019)	Finalize Goals and Objectives
Milestone # 2 (July 22, 2019)	Refine Strategies; Complete Objectives with Target Dates and Leads
Milestone # 3 (August 18, 2019)	Issue First Draft of Strategic Plan for Subcommittee Review
Milestone # 4 (September 16, 2019)	Presentation to the Board of Directors
Milestone # 5 (September 30, 2019)	Finalize and Approve Plan & Develop Community-Friendly Summary
Milestone # 6 (October 30, 2019)	Develop Short Term Implementation Plans