CASA
Court Appointed Special Advocates
FOR CHILDREN
OF SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

CASA of Santa Cruz County

ADVOCATE HANDBOOK

Updated March 2017

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INTRODUCTION TO COURT APPOINTED SPECIAL ADVOCATES

What is a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)?

A CASA is a trained volunteer appointed by a Judge of the Juvenile Dependency Court to advocate for the best interests of children who are defined as "Court Dependents" by the California Welfare & Institutions Code Section 300. During the time the child remains in the Dependency Court system, the CASA Advocate investigates the child's circumstances, provides fact-based information and makes recommendations to the Court while becoming a source of friendship and emotional support to the child.

The CASA Advocate acts independently but works closely with Family and Children's Services and Social Workers, therapists, attorneys, teachers and other professionals involved in a child's case. Advocates always work in partnership with the CASA program staff as part of the collaborative team serving the child.

Non-Discrimination Policy

The goal of CASA of Santa Cruz County is to recruit a representative cross-section of the public who will effectively and compassionately serve as advocates for children in the dependency system. It is the policy of CASA of Santa Cruz County to provide equal opportunity to all volunteers and staff in recruitment, screening, training, and supervision. CASA respects the dignity and diversity of our community and will not discriminate on the basis of race, national origin or ancestry, marital status, religion, age, disability, sexual orientation, gender, political affiliation, or socioeconomic level.

Dismissal, Resignation, or Termination

Dismissal: A volunteer will be dismissed from a case at the time the case closes, or at any time by order of the Dependency Court Judge. Any party in a case or their representative may request in writing to the CASA program that an Advocate be dismissed, stating the reasons for the request. The Advocate's Supervisor will interview the Advocate, investigate the alleged basis for dismissal, and a determination will be made by the CASA Executive Director. An Advocate may be suspended from his or her case while the investigation is underway if deemed appropriate by the Executive Director of CASA, who has sole discretion in this decision.

If the Executive Director determines that dismissal from the case is appropriate, she/he can advance the matter to the Dependency Court Judge for his/her decision and if there is concurrence, the Order of Dismissal will be signed by the judge. A notice of the dismissal will be distributed to the Advocate, all parties to the case, and their representatives. The Advocate will be provided with a confidential memorandum identifying the reasons for the dismissal. If appropriate, the Advocate may have the opportunity to be assigned to another case.

Resignation: While Advocates make a commitment to continue serving on a case until it is dismissed, there may be circumstances that require a volunteer to resign. A volunteer may ask to be removed from a case by submitting a written request to his/her Advocate Supervisor. The request will be reviewed by the CASA Program Manager and/or Executive Director. The

Dependency Court Judge will execute an Order of Dismissal that will be mailed to all parties to for notification of their resignation. CASA of Santa Cruz will assign another volunteer to the child if appropriate.

Termination: CASA volunteers serve at the discretion of the Court and the CASA program. The Executive Director of CASA has the discretion and authority to terminate the service of any Advocate or other volunteer from the CASA program. All terminations are final.

Appropriate grounds for termination include, but are not limited to:

1. Falsification of the volunteer application or misrepresentation of facts during the screening or evaluation process.
2. The Advocate taking action without CASA or Court approval that endangers the child or is outside the role of the CASA program.
3. The Advocate violating a program policy, Court rule or law.
4. The Advocate demonstrating an inability to effectively carry out the duties of an Advocate.
5. The Advocate failing to complete required ongoing training.
6. The Advocate demonstrating an inability to work effectively as a team member.
7. The Advocate failing to maintain contact with their Advocate Supervisor or follow his/her direction.
8. Failure to maintain confidentiality.
9. Initiation of ex-parte communication with the Court.
10. The Advocate under the influence or use of drugs/alcohol while with their child.
11. The Advocate engaging in illegal drug use.

In accordance with the California Rules of Court Program Requirements for Court Appointed Special Advocates Rule 5.655 specifically prohibits Advocates from the following:

1. Taking a child to the CASA volunteer's home;
2. Giving legal advice or therapeutic counseling;
3. Giving Money or expensive gifts to the child or family;
4. Being related to any parties involved in a case or being employed in a position and/or agency that might result in a conflict of interest; and
5. Any other activities prohibited by the local juvenile court.

Important: At the conclusion of every case –whether by dismissal, resignation, or termination- the volunteer Advocate shall return all case records to the CASA Advocate Supervisor.

Once you are dismissed as the Advocate, you will no longer have access to Court documents or CASA files. CASA will no longer be privy to this information.

CASA will provide ongoing support to you if you remain involved with the child and their family. CASA of Santa Cruz recommends that you maintain the same boundaries set up by CASA during the open dependency case. However, if you choose to include the child in your personal life (by introducing the child to your family, friends, taking them to your home or to personal events) you would no longer meet the criteria to be reassigned as their CASA if the family's circumstances required the family to re-enter into the Juvenile Dependency system again.

If you choose to change your relationship to a "family friend" of your former CASA child, while being assigned as CASA to a new child in the Dependency system, you are not permitted to

introduce, discuss, or disclose the nature of your relationship of your current case with the former CASA child. For example, you are not permitted to take former and current CASA child(ren) to the park, the beach, events, the CASA house, etc. together. We are obligated to insure the confidentiality of our current CASA youth involved in the Dependency Court system.

Grievance Policy

This policy, along with a copy of the Advocate's Order of Assignment, is provided to all parties involved in the child's case.

CASA holds its staff and volunteer Advocates to the highest standards of professionalism. If you have a complaint about a CASA volunteer or staff member, please follow the steps below to ensure prompt attention to your concern.

- If the issue involves a volunteer Advocate, please call the CASA Program Manager at 831.761.2956.

- If your concern is not resolved satisfactorily, a written grievance may be submitted to the CASA Executive Director, 813 Freedom Boulevard, Watsonville, CA 95076.

- Complaints concerning CASA staff should be directed to the Executive Director at 831.761.2956.

- A grievance pertaining to the Executive Director should be submitted in writing to the Board President, CASA Board of Directors, 813 Freedom Boulevard, Watsonville, CA 95076.

- Written grievances concerning CASA volunteers will be retained in the volunteer's confidential personnel file.

Confidentiality

The confidentiality rules are stipulated by the California Judicial Council's rule 5.655. It states *"All information concerning children and families in the juvenile court process is confidential. Volunteers must not give case information to anyone other than the court, the parties and their attorneys, and CASA staff."*

'Confidential' information is personal information about a child that is accessible only to certain classes of individuals under specific circumstances. The existence of the dependency case and all information pertaining to it shall not be disclosed to any parties other than those with a legal right to it. An Advocate has access to information regarding his/her child's case to the extent authorized by the Dependency Court Judge. An Advocate shall not disclose ANY information about a child or case -regardless of whether pending or closed- to any person, including family members and members of the Dependency Court system who are not directly involved with that particular case.

Advocates receive a court-issued Order of Assignment authorizing them to request confidential information from doctors, teachers, therapists and other professionals involved

with the child. If the Advocate is also the child's educational rights holder, the Advocate will receive an additional signed court order to that effect.

CASA maintains a confidential file for each child containing the child's history and reasons the family came under the jurisdiction of the Court. It contains all subsequent filings and reports generated throughout the case. The Advocate may review the file at CASA. Children's files do not leave the premises and are kept in a locked file room. If an Advocate receives case-related documents from an outside party, they shall be brought to CASA for inclusion in the child's confidential file; including Court documents and IEPs.

Any draft court reports or written case notes kept by an Advocate at home must be kept in a secure location that is not accessible to others. Any notes discarded by the Advocate must first be shredded or brought to CASA for shredding. Upon the Advocate's dismissal from the case, all case-related notes in the Advocate's possession shall be returned to CASA.

Advocates must comply with the following:

1. All Advocates must sign the Oath of Confidentiality.

2. Do not use last names or reveal information about a CASA child or family in e-mail or voicemail. When leaving a message for a party to the case, refer to the child by first name and last initial only.

3. All Advocate-generated reports, memos, or correspondence to the Court or to attorneys must be approved and disseminated through the CASA Advocate Supervisor.

4. All case reviews, court reviews, and team meetings are confidential and the information discussed is not to be disclosed to others.

5. Do not give out your home address. Any correspondence to the Advocate should be sent to CASA at 813 Freedom Blvd., Watsonville, CA 95076.

6. Advocates may not "friend" their CASA child on any social networking site. Electronic links between the child or the child's family and the Advocate is not allowed. See Social Media Policy below.

7. The rules of confidentiality apply to the Advocates' knowledge of all of CASA's children and families, including knowledge of other Advocates' cases.

Soliciting free or reduced-price goods or services for your CASA child

CASA is continually working with community groups, individuals, and businesses to secure free or reduced-price activities, lessons, classes, cultural experiences, backpacks, clothing and other resources for children served by CASA. There may be occasions in which the need of your CASA child exceeds the resources CASA has at its disposal.

If you identify such a need, please discuss it with your Advocate Supervisor before pursuing goods or services on your own.

Here's why:

- Pursuing resources for one child can jeopardize efforts for donations that could accommodate all CASA children.
- CASA ensures that donors are properly acknowledged, and receive the appropriate documentation if their donation is tax-deductible.
- As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, CASA is required to keep track of and report all donations of cash, items, and services.
- Your CASA child's confidentiality must be safeguarded in trying to obtain free or reduced cost services! Your Supervisor can help you fulfill this responsibility.

Social Media Policy

It is not permissible for Advocates to use social media to communicate with CASA youth. If you believe your own circumstances warrant a review or an exception, please contact your Advocate Supervisor.

Advocate Photo Release

Your signature on the final page of this document grants Court Appointed Special Advocates of Santa Cruz County the right to use your photograph in CASA materials including publicity, outreach brochures, illustrations, advertising, and Web content. If you would prefer not to have your image used please notify your Advocate Supervisor in writing.

Mandated Reporting

Advocates are mandated reporters. As such, an Advocate shall report any reasonable suspicion that a child is a victim of abuse or neglect by calling the 24-hour Family and Children's Services hotline at 454-2273 (454-CARE). Reports are confidential and your name will not be revealed to persons being reported. Advocates are required to attend a United Way mandated reporter training sometime in the first six months after becoming an Advocate. If you have questions regarding your obligations as a Mandated Reporter please contact your Advocate Supervisor.

Transportation Policy

Your signature on the final page of this document affirms your agreement to abide by this policy. It is not mandatory for a CASA volunteer to provide transportation in a personal vehicle but in doing so the volunteer assumes liability as well as responsibility for the safety of passengers. Advocates who transport children must have a valid California driver's license, a clean driving record and proof of current insurance. Copies of these items are maintained in each volunteer's file. The volunteer is required to provide updated copies to the CASA office annually or as requested. By your signature on this document CASA is authorized to access your driving record from the State Department of Motor Vehicles and will enroll you in the Employer Pull Notice (EPN) program to receive notice of any action taken against your driving privilege.

Volunteers must obtain verbal permission from a caregiver to transport a child.

Notification to the child's Social Worker is required to transport the child across county lines. (Email or phone message is acceptable notification.)

Advocates must obey all safety and traffic laws and shall not exceed the posted speed limit. The Advocate must immediately disclose to CASA any change in driving status including any moving violation, a DUI, or involvement in a serious or injury accident. Any volunteer who receives a DUI will be prohibited from transporting a CASA child and may be terminated from the CASA program. A person convicted of a DUI within seven years may not serve as an Advocate.

A volunteer involved in a serious or injury accident or cited for any two-point violation is prohibited from transporting a CASA child without a waiver from the Executive Director.

Any child under the age of eight or under 4' 9" must be transported in an approved child car seat. All children under 8 years of age MUST be secured in a seatbelt in the backseat of the vehilce at all times. Car seats are available at CASA for volunteers serving children who meet this criteria.

All adult passengers (over the age of 18) must wear seatbelts. All children not in a child seat must wear their own seatbelts and may not sit on an adult's lap.

CASA volunteers will not allow their CASA child to drive their vehicle. If there is an emergency the CASA volunteer will call 911 and then the CASA office.

Conflicts of Interest

CASA volunteers advocate for the best interests of the child. Therefore:

1. The Advocate agrees to maintain an unbiased position and to independently assess a child's needs and circumstances before formulating his or her recommendations.

2. The volunteer shall not use the CASA organization or its relationship to the Court to advocate for or express his or her own personal views.

3. An Advocate may not serve simultaneously as a child's Advocate and as the child's foster parent or guardian. Should a volunteer wish to pursue a status other than the child's Advocate, the Advocate must first be dismissed from the case by the judge.

4. The Advocate is not authorized to use CASA letterhead for any reason. All requests for services, goods, or information regarding a CASA child or case must first be approved by CASA staff.

CASA Commitment Statement

As a Court Appointed Special Advocate I will be an ethical member of the CASA team. I will perform my duties according to the above-stated policies and rules of confidentiality. I will conscientiously pursue consistent progress in accordance with my child's advocacy plan.

I agree to:

1. Commit to the CASA program for a minimum of 24 months.

2. **Maintain and submit monthly activity logs to my Supervisor EACH MONTH by the end of the first week of the following month** detailing my activities and contacts and the number of hours spent in my capacity as an Advocate.

3. **Contact my Advocate Supervisor at least monthly** to maintain dialogue and ensure concurrence with my activities. I will apprise my Supervisor of any changes in my personal status or contact information, or that of others involved in my child's case. I will follow my child's advocacy plan as established with my Advocate Supervisor, and understand that should my actions be deemed inappropriate I may be subject to dismissal from the case.

4. **Complete 12 hours of continuing education** annually to maintain my status as an Advocate.

5. Notify CASA immediately of any accident, injury, report of abuse made to FCS, or other incident involving the child. I will communicate any concerns or issues to CASA program staff as soon as they arise.

6. Understand and follow through on my obligations as a Mandated Reporter and Officer of the Court.

7. Turn in court reports to my Supervisor **three weeks** before the child's review hearings.

8. Attend my child's Court hearings and provide timely notification to CASA staff if I am unable to attend.

9. Establish an appropriate place in my home to keep all confidential case files, notes and correspondence.

10. Notify and get the approval of the Social Worker and obtain permission of the caregiver before taking the child out of the county.

11. Operate a motor vehicle only with a valid California driver's license, and notify CASA within 48 hours of a serious or injury accident, an arrest for a DUI, or if my license is suspended.

12. Maintain current automobile insurance if I am transporting my child and notify the CASA office within 48 hours should my car insurance be terminated or revoked.

13. Communicate openly and respectfully to all with whom I come in contact.

14. Refrain from acting as a spokesperson or representative of CASA to the press or in any public forum without direct permission from the Executive Director.

CASA's Board of Directors and staff value and appreciate every person who chooses to serve a child as an Advocate. CASA assures you of a place to have your feelings heard and respected, and of the right to express to us your opinions or concerns.

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My signature indicates that I have read, understand, and agree to each of the policies stated in this Advocate Handbook and will uphold my obligations under the Commitment Statement.

_____

Volunteer Name (Print)

_____ _____

Volunteer Signature Date