

CASA & Runaway Youth

It is the policy of the CASA program to have CASA's remain on their case when their youth goes on 'run away status' or what is referred to as 'AWOL' (Absent Without Leave). The CASA can play a valuable role in this situation by 'staying in the loop'. This means keeping in touch with the social worker and the other legal parties to the case as well as with other significant adults and relationships to the youth.

Our youth run away for many reasons, but the one reason we feel is the most evident is the lack of attachments and meaningful relationships with systems people or the foster families or group home staff tasked with caring for them. Unfortunately in difficult times the youth we work with react by running away from the problem, the issue because most often they do not have the skills to negotiate with the people caring for them. It is very important for the CASA volunteer especially when dealing with a chronic runaway youth to not only stay in touch with the Social Worker, attorneys and shelter provider. Also important and when appropriate, set up contracts or plans with the minor so that if they do feel like running away that they will talk with you, reach out to you. When a youth is in a meaningful relationship with you they often want to talk but they will also be fearful of feeling judged. As CASA volunteers we can help the youth know we care but we do not see running away as a good option to dealing with problems.

Has your CASA Youth Run Away?

If yes...now what?

It is important that you try to *not take it personal, panic or become someone who tries to over compensate or run in to save the child*. Most of all, expect to feel helpless and not aware of what to do to make the behavior stop. You must remain cool headed and remember you are the youth advocate for a systems youth. These youth have many dilemmas and as they grow up in the system these dilemmas will change; better, worsen again. We know from past experience that your CASA youth is most likely still in the area. Studies indicate that 50% of youth who run away stay within 10 miles of their home. Sonoma County is a small area geographically. The probability is that they are in the Santa Rosa area where many other youth 'hang out'. A run away youth is not an uncommon issue in Sonoma County.

The police know the child welfare system and we do have a state of the art youth home called Valley of the Moon Children's Home (V.O.M.C.H.). If a child runs away and is located while on runaway status, the VOM is where law enforcement will return them. One step you can take to prepare for the youth return is to call the social worker and have your name placed on the list of allowed visitors at VOMCH so that if the child shows up the staff should call you and once you are on the 'approved visitors' list, you can visit the child. We also know that the youth often 'couch surf' (stay with friends or relatives on their couches), wander the streets, or sleep in parks or unsecured buildings. Keeping in touch with your youth's family and friends is very important. When calling a family or friend to ask if they have seen the child and make sure you give them the CASA office

number or (if you feel comfortable) your cell number so they can contact you. Above and beyond them calling, let them know they can give the number to the youth for the youth to call. Let them know you would like to talk to the youth about how he/she is doing.

A good rule to remember is to contact the office to let us know the situation and ask for advice as well as receive support. You are not alone in any of this and we are here to provide assistance so that you can feel as aware of the on goings as possible.

Check your youth's recent placement to see if they left any messages/information with other youth in the facility. Touch base with the shelter to see what the impact of the runaway status does to their bed space in the facility. Will the youth lose their room in the placement or will they hold it for a certain amount of days?

Talk with your youth's social worker and keep in contact with her/him. Don't let the social worker forget that this youth, although on runaway status, is still a dependent youth. Don't let the social worker's case load lose this youth is important and deserving of search and investigation. Note also, in cases where the youth has a history of chronic runaway behavior that the social worker may not place much importance on this situation because of the patterns. In reality, the youth often return in a few days or the social worker feels efforts have been futile.

In some cases, and especially when the youth has been missing for more than 10 days, talk with your social worker about contacting *the police*: Report your youth- not only as a runaway- but also a missing person. If possible try to form a relationship with the police officer or detective (if there is one) on the case to provide the officer with information about your youth. Although issuing a 'missing persons report' should be filed in 48 hours it is unfortunate with chronic runaway offenders that the police and social worker will often not take the runaway status seriously until more time has passed.

Runaway behavior is considered a "status offense." This simply means it warrants police involvement. Running away is not a crime or a criminal offense for which a youth would be confined to a juvenile detention facility unless the circumstances have been larger than the ability of the department of human service to handle. When the police retrieve your youth, be aware that they will return your youth to VOMCH unless the youth has committed a crime. In the case of a crime having been committed, they will take the youth to Juvenile Hall (Los Guilicos) and a hearing will be held to determine the next step. Our court is very aware of these issues and often will reprimand the youth but return them to VOMCH. CASAs can help the court by appearing at the hearing and providing the court with a little history of this youth's dependence status. Remember that Juvenile probation is different than dependence court and your youth will have other judges, attorneys and court workers. The social worker may or may not be present. Your attendance can help tremendously. Please note that when youth return to care these hearing happen very quickly and it is one reason to always stay in touch with your social worker. If a youth is picked up they can very quickly be placed in juvenile hall or VOMCH. The more aware you are of the current situation, the better your chances of being informed when the youth is found or returns. Always make sure your youth's social

worker has put your name on the visitation list allowing you to visit the youth at VOMCH or at the juvenile hall facility. If your youth does get placed into Los Guillicos Juvenile Hall they may get an intake Probation Officer that inputs their paperwork. The phone number for the main desk to ask for that officer is 565-6300. If your youth's social worker is not available due to a vacation, etc. you can always ask for the 'social worker of the day' when calling human services at 565-4300.

'Street life' threats

Street life is the hardest thing to fathom as a CASA volunteer. Having the youth you serve and care about run away is not an easy thing to manage or understand. You must remember *this is not your child*; it is a child of the juvenile court system. So; stay focused, try to remain as non-judgmental as possible. Your objectivity and willingness to be open to the youth is important. The office understands though that, yes, this is a scary time, and a very 'at risk' behavior your youth is displaying.

Your youth may not understand what they could be getting themselves into by running, as they may be following the lead of a peer or may not be a chronic runner. Your youth could potentially become a target for predatory adults or other youth. If on the streets for a drawn out period of time, our youth will have to bargain for money and/or food.

Every year, assault, illness, and suicide claim the lives of approximately 5,000 runaway and homeless.

According to a 2002 Family and Youth Services Bureau Report, 35% of runaway and homeless youth had used drugs; 40% live in poverty; 26% have attempted suicide; 47% were kicked out of their home; 33% were assaulted and/or robbed on the streets; 66% had trouble meeting basic needs away from home; and 80% had attempted or committed a theft-related activity.

Many medical and psychological situations either worsen or develop on the streets for your youth. While homeless, youth often suffer from poor hygiene, lack of sleep, high exposure to violence (both as victims and witnesses) and difficult weather conditions, which can result in a variety of medical problems. Some runaway and homeless youth turn to exchanging sex for basic needs like food, clothing, shelter, or protection, increasing their risk for HIV infection and other sexually transmitted diseases. Other common threats to runaway and homeless youth include depression, thoughts of suicide, other serious mental health problems, and high rates of intravenous drug use.

When your youth returns to care, some of the afore mentioned issues maybe apparent. In a tactful way these issues need to be addressed and appropriate steps taken to care for the youth physical and metal health needs. These issues should be discussed with the social worker to develop a plan.

What happens if the youth contacts you while on runaway status?

It is always best to keep a non-judgmental attitude and remain calm, try to develop a phone relationship and talk about staying in contact.

If you obtain information such as the youth's location, you *must* tell the social worker and CASA office about it. It is also advised to talk to the youth about the fact that you are going to talk with the social worker about how the youth is and where the youth is.

Some questions to ask may include: How are you feeling? Are you in a safe place? Are you scared? What made you run? Listen, and allow the youth to start the direction of the conversation. Remember to back off if the questions seem too probing. If you can find out the youth's location, you have a chance to help the child return to care. CASA volunteers are often contacted by the youth while they are on runaway status and this can be a good thing. We all want to know they are okay but *you have an obligation to report this contact*. If the youth will not meet you with the goal to return to care, make an appointment for the youth to call you again. Remember that the CASA office phone is a readily available line for them to call in on. During business hours we are there and after hours we will pick up calls every few hours. Please note that you should keep the CASA supervisor and the social worker aware of any contact you make with the youth.

Other Contacts you can make and keep up with:

Contact your youth's school. Your youth may still be attending classes or in contact with classmates.

If you know the phone numbers or places of employment of your youth's friends, contact them. Although your youth is on the run, he/she may still be in contact with close friends. Be aware to *not create an environment of hostility*. Do not call your youth's friends and demand to know their location. This may cause your youth to fear coming home and, consequently, leave the immediate area. Have the friends contact the Runaway Hotline (1-800-621-4000) to relay any messages. Using a mediator or go-between reduces the fears that your youth or their friends may have.

When Your Youth Returns from Running Away:

Why are did he/she run away? A youth runs away as a means of managing a current conflict or stressful situation. They often don't feel as if they've been 'heard'. Remember that the current conflict or stressful situation is just as important to 'hear', recognize and resolve (if not more important) than the fact that your youth has run away. Do not make unrealistic expectations for your youth's return. Get your youth into VOMCH or their shelter and then take the time to evaluate the complete situation. Also, don't assume you know why the youth ran, listen to them.

The return of your youth can be a very emotional time:

Your youth may be feeling guilty or humiliated for his actions. Your youth may also be filled with fear of anticipated punishment.

As a CASA, you may feel great relief, sadness and gratitude for having your youth return safely. Be careful not to reward the runaway behavior. You may express disapproval for your youth's actions, recognize your timing when doing so. Express the fact that you are relieved that he or she is home safely. Also, remember to affirm that you care for him/her as a person. You may also feel overwhelmed by other emotions such as anger, distrust, and/or a desire to punish. Do not appear to be so filled with anger that your youth reads your emotions as that you do not want your youth to return home. If your youth returns to a situation filled with anger, there is little reason for him/her to stay. Remain open and non-judgmental to the return of your youth. Despite what you are feeling, some -or all- of the following steps may help ease the transition period:

With the social worker and/ the placement staff:

- See if medical attention is warranted.
- Show youth your caring and concern.
- Communicate. Listen to your youth; his or her messages are extremely important and must take priority in the re-establishment of your relationship.

- Contact schools, officials, police, etc., to let them know your youth has returned home.

- Develop a plan with your youth to work on the problems that exist within your home. Involve professional support, as needed, to assist you in determining the best way to strengthen the family relationships.

- Maintain communication and view the experience as a learning situation and work with your youth to communicate more about the concerns of this happening again, how to avoid it, other options for expression (art, journaling, calling you, talking to a specific staff person at the home, etc.)
- Be the youth advocate. Be firm that this was not something you want to see happen again but that you care and that relationships are important to you...therefore the youth is important to you.

The Problem of Runaway and Homeless Youth:

Nationally:

- 1.3 million runaways and homeless youth live on the streets of America.
- One out of every seven youth will run away sometime between the ages of 10 and 18.
- Every year approximately 5000 runaways and homeless youth die from assault, illness, and suicide.

In California:

Approximately 50,000 youth run away in California annually. About 45% of these youth are "repeat (or 'chronic') runners."

Studies indicate that 50% of teenagers who run away stay within 10 miles of their placement. They often stay with friends or relatives, wander the streets or sleep in parks or unsecured buildings. CASA youth often run with other systems youth and end up in camping situations. During the summer many youth go to the Santa Rosa area and walk the malls, hang out on Fourth Street, the bus depot, and Railroad Square. Laundromats are also places where they can keep warm and out of the elements. Although we know some of these patterns it is important that you do not attempt to shelter or find shelter for the youth. The role of the CASA is to be sensitive about the danger, to encourage the youth to return to care, to check out the situation, and hopefully, find the minor's location so you can contact the social worker.

It is a hard and worrisome time for a CASA to not know the location and safety of a youth you are assigned to. Staying in close contact with the staff will go a long way to easing your stress, getting support, providing resources, and helping you put your role into perspective. We are here to help and support you.

Data compiled from The National Runaway Switchboard, The National Runaway Prevention Curriculum, 2005.