Mission Statement:

The Sonoma County Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) Program is committed to serving abused and neglected children coming before the Juvenile Court for protection and rehabilitation services.

The purpose of the CASA program is to <u>humanize</u> the complex child welfare system for the child victim by providing a trained volunteer who will act as a consistent role model, advocate, and potential life connection.

Program Goals:

1. To reduce the trauma of children in the Juvenile Court dependency system by matching a child with a trained CASA volunteer who will offer support through a long-term consistent relationship. The volunteer will explore and recommend resource options available to the child and offer the child guidance in understanding and dealing with the complex, unfamiliar court and child welfare systems.

2. To advocate vigorously for the rights of abused and neglected children in Sonoma County ensuring that all "reasonable efforts" have been made for a child at every stage of the court dependency process.

3. To improve the quality of information presented to the Juvenile Court, on behalf of the child, by informing the court of the child's adjustment and state of mind by gathering relevant information and making appropriate case recommendations documented in a written court report.

4. To develop and implement a sound program management plan with a comprehensive strategy for the recruitment, retention, supervision, and training of a competent volunteer corps that is <u>ethnically</u>, <u>racially</u>, and <u>linguistically</u> representative of the population to be served.

Annual Program Objectives:

1. To serve 200-220 abused and neglected children annually
2. To provide supervision and support to the 160-180 active CASA volunteers
3. To assist these volunteers in submitting 400-480 court reports documenting their child's life and needs
4. To work in collaboration with the children welfare system, the courts and the child to assure that the child's need are met and heard
5. To remind the community that abused and neglected children need our help

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Why CASA?

When the Juvenile Court Judge assumes jurisdiction and finds a child to be a dependent of the court, many different professionals enter the case. These include social workers, minors' attorney, and attorneys from County Counsel, the Public Defender's office, law enforcement officials, and counselors. Everyone involved has some interest to represent and while their intent is to serve the child, none of these professional's time is focused solely on the child's esteem, daily well being, personal desires/needs and interests.

The Juvenile Court's objective in assigning a CASA is to provide a single consistent person who will take the time to mentor, advocate for and keep the interests and welfare of the child a priority. Serving as a complement to the deposition of the case, CASAs can provide the companionship and self-esteem enhancing support needed during a time of turbulence and confusion.

The CASA Program provides representation without charge to children between the ages of birth to twenty-one, who have been adjudged dependent children of the court under Welfare and Institution Code Sections 300 and 602. CASA is one of 44 similar programs across the state and 900 across the United States. We are a member of the National and State CASA Associations.

CASA Facts:

- Currently in California 90,000 children are living in foster homes and small group homes.

- Over 600 hundred of these children are right here in Sonoma County.

- 220 of these children receive CASA services annually.

- Locally CASA has over 180 volunteers providing over 15,000 hours of service annually. These volunteers serve as child advocates (100), advisors, help in the office, and serve on the board and committees.

- Sonoma County CASA started in 1996. It is one of 900 nationwide programs, 42 of which serve California.

- CASA has a $545,000 annual budget and we are funded by private means (events, grants, corporations and individual donors). The funds are used to recruit, screen, train, place, and supervise the advocate mentor-mentee match.

- CASA is very proud that only 18 cents out of each dollar donated goes to administrative overhead leaving 85 cents on each dollar for direct client services.

Current Needs:

CASA currently has a waitlist of 45 children seeking our services. Our current goal, focus on the recruitment, screening, training and matching of 60-70 more volunteers to 65-75 more children. We want to eliminate the current waitlist of children wishing to have a youth advocate as well as increase our caseloads to assure that all children have the services they need. We also want to focus on the recruitment of more men to serve our teen male youth.

Program Description:

The goal of the Court Appointed Special Advocates (**CASA**) program is to **prevent abused and neglected children from becoming lost in the Juvenile Dependency system.** The objective of matching a **CASA** Volunteer, a trained advocate from the community is to ensure that the child's best interest is represented.

The volunteer has three essential roles as an advocate:

- to be the child's voice in court, representing their needs, concerns, and best interests;

- to complement the Juvenile Court/Child Welfare systems by researching and assessing the circumstances of each case and reporting their recommendations and findings;

- to continue to support the child and the progress of the case as it moves through the system;

The program receives referrals directly from the Juvenile Court. **CASAs** are matched to the child and provide approximately 10-12 hours of service per month on casework. After reviewing the case information and court reports the volunteer consults with clinical and program staff to develop a case plan. Prior to each court hearing, the volunteer prepares a court report containing their evaluations and recommendations for the child. The Juvenile Court judge reads and considers the **CASA** report in addition to the social worker's report prior to making his decision. Volunteers attend all Juvenile Court hearings that affect the rights and welfare of the child. Each court appointed volunteer is carefully screened and receives 27-32 hours of expert training in skills necessary to fulfill his or her responsibilities.

CASA volunteers are in a unique position because they provide information not usually available to the Juvenile Court. Because of the growing number of cases filed in Juvenile Court and dwindling resources to adequately monitor the cases, judges find the CASA volunteers to be positive complements to providing the information necessary to make better-informed decisions.

In addition to our services to abused and neglected children, the **CASA** program works to provide community education and awareness concerning the issues of child abuse, neglect and child welfare policy. We are also committed to working toward public policies that promote child abuse prevention and addressing reforms in the Juvenile Dependency/Foster Care system.

History Statement

CASA is a non-profit community organization that provides volunteer advocacy services to children who are under Juvenile Court jurisdiction (i.e., foster care, adoption services, and juvenile delinquency). Superior Court Judge Arnold Rosenfield founded the Sonoma County CASA program in 1996. The Judge was concerned because he often saw children languishing in the foster care system or become the victims of poorly documented or supported decisions. The Judge was also concerned with the self-esteem and emotional care that the children received. This CASA program was the 32nd program founded in the state of California. Since its inception, CASA has been the "Child's Voice in Court" for OVER 1,000 abused and neglected children.