

CASA of Allegheny County Program Policies

I) OVERALL PROGRAM POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

a) Program Mission

- i) To ensure that every child has a safe, supportive and permanent home by providing volunteer advocacy for the best interests of abused and neglected children within the child welfare system.

b) Program Purpose

- i) CASA of Allegheny County recruits, screens, trains and supervises volunteers who are then available for appointment by juvenile court judges on complex abuse and neglect cases that are active in juvenile court. The program strives to help move children more quickly through the court system to safe, permanent placements.

c) Goals and Objectives

- i) The goal of the CASA program is to provide expeditious and thorough advocacy to abused and/or neglected children that will lead to permanence. The CASA volunteers serve as the "eyes and ears of the court" by providing a detailed account of each child's situation to aid the judge in permanency planning decisions. To achieve this goal, the CASA volunteers perform four (4) basic functions:

- (1) Investigate all circumstances surrounding the child's case.
- (2) Collect all relevant historical information about the child and gather first hand, updated information.
- (3) Report the findings and make recommendations to the court regarding placement (short and long term), visitation and services that will serve the child's best interest.
- (4) Monitor the case to ensure that necessary services are received, that Family Service Plans are updated in a timely manner and address the needs of the child and family, and that court orders are followed.

d) Program Target Population

- i) CASA of Allegheny County serves children between the ages of birth to 17 years who have been adjudicated dependent and are receiving services from Allegheny County Children, Youth and Family Services, without discrimination based on a child's age, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, nationality, disability or religion. The target population of service is children who are age six or younger and are in need of more intensive monitoring of their situations to aid in permanency planning.

e) Referral Procedures

- i) Any party can make a referral of a case, the CASA program or at the initiation of a juvenile court judge. A juvenile court judge must sign an order to appoint a CASA. Upon receipt of the court order, the CASA program will match the case to an appropriate volunteer, if one is available, and file a Notice of Assignment with the court and will route to all parties.

II) VOLUNTEER SERVICES

a) Basic Requirements for a CASA Volunteer

- i) CASA of Allegheny County has high quality standards for volunteers. All volunteers must:
 - (1) Be 21 years of age.
 - (2) Successfully pass CASA of Allegheny County screening requirements. (See Screening Policies.)
 - (3) Successfully complete CASA of Allegheny County training. (See Training Policies.)
 - (4) Abide by CASA of Allegheny County's policies and procedures.

b) Roles and Responsibilities

- i) To advocate for the best interests of the child, the CASA volunteer will:
 - (1) Review Children, Youth and Family Services records and consult with the caseworker.
 - (2) Interview parties involved in the case, including the child.
 - (3) Determine whether or not reasonable efforts are being made to provide services to the child and family, and ensure that a permanent plan has been created for the child.
 - (4) Ensure that the child's best interests are represented at every stage of disposition by:
 - (a) Submitting written reports before each review hearing to the judge of the case which includes findings and recommendations;
 - (b) Attending all court hearings; and
 - (c) Advocating for prompt review of the case if the child needs attention.
 - (5) Monitor the case by:
 - (a) Visiting the child/family as often as necessary to observe whether or not the child's essential needs are being met, and to ensure compliance with the court's order;
 - (b) Participating in any planning or treatment team meetings involving the child in order to monitor the status of the child's permanent plan;
 - (c) Communicating with involved service providers to ensure that services are being provided to and utilized by the family as specified by the court's order; and
 - (d) Calling case meetings as needed to review case status and to facilitate a permanent plan.
 - (6) Report any incidents of suspected child abuse or neglect to the CASA of Allegheny County staff and to Allegheny County Children, Youth and Family Services. If appropriate, volunteers, after consulting with their case manager, will contact the local authorities.

- (7) Maintain complete written records about the case, including a log of appointments, interviews, telephone calls, and other information gathered about the child.
 - (8) Maintain the confidentiality of the information gathered regarding the case and the identity of the involved parties.
 - (9) Maintain a professional and cooperative attitude, including appropriate demeanor and dress.
 - (10) Understand the importance of and have a respect for those involved who may come from different cultures or backgrounds and interact with them in a professional manner.
 - (11) Communicate regularly with CASA staff regarding the case and consult with CASA supervisor prior to making any recommendations regarding the case.
 - (12) Attend a minimum of twelve (12) hours of ongoing training each year.
- c) Impermissible CASA Volunteer Activities
- i) A CASA volunteer should not become inappropriately involved in the case by providing direct service delivery to any parties that could: (a) lead to a conflict of interest or liability problems; or (b) cause a child or family to become dependent on the CASA volunteer for services that should be provided by other agencies or organizations. Examples of inappropriate volunteer practices are:
 - (1) Taking a child to the volunteer's home or sheltering a child in the volunteer's home.
 - (2) Giving legal advice or therapeutic counseling.
 - (3) Making placement arrangements for the child.
 - (4) Giving money or expensive gifts to the child or family.
 - (5) Transporting the child in an automobile.
 - (6) Being related to any parties involved in the case, or be employed in a position and/or agency that might result in a conflict of interest.
- d) Volunteer Screening Policies
- i) To ensure that volunteers accepted into the CASA program are competent and of good character, CASA of Allegheny County carefully screens all volunteer applicants using the following procedures:
 - (1) The applicant must submit a written application containing information concerning personal experiences with child abuse and/or neglect, educational background, employment, volunteer history and experience working with children.
 - (2) The applicant shall participate in a personal interview with a CASA staff member.
 - (3) The applicant must provide three (3) references from persons unrelated to the applicant, at least two (2) of who have directly supervised the applicant.
 - (4) The CASA program will conduct a formal security check of the volunteer applicant by screening criminal records through the Pennsylvania State Police and the Central Child Abuse Registry.

- (5) If the applicant has lived in another state within the last five (5) years, the CASA program will conduct a formal criminal records background check with that state.
 - (6) The volunteer applicant will not be accepted into the CASA program if:
 - (a) Convicted as an adult of either a felony or misdemeanor which is a sex offense, a crime affecting family relationships, child abuse or neglect, assault, battery or a crime against public morals or related acts that would pose risks to children or the CASA program's credibility;
 - (b) Found to have charges pending for criminal offenses or offenses listed above;
 - (c) Refuses to sign a release of information for appropriate law enforcement checks; or
 - (d) At the discretion of the CASA program director, the applicant cannot successfully carry out CASA duties and responsibilities.
 - (7) Volunteers are not permitted academic credits for CASA service.
- e) Volunteer Training Policies
- i) The CASA program provides 35 hours of training to ensure that volunteers understand their roles and responsibilities.
 - ii) The volunteer applicant must attend a minimum of thirty (30) hours of initial training. Training topics include:
 - (1) Roles and responsibilities of a CASA volunteer;
 - (2) Juvenile court process;
 - (3) Dynamics of human behavior associated with child abuse and neglect;
 - (4) Dynamics of families;
 - (5) Federal and state laws including ASFA, CAPTA, ICWA and MEPA;
 - (6) Confidentiality and record keeping practices;
 - (7) Child development;
 - (8) Child abuse and neglect;
 - (9) Permanency planning and resources;
 - (10) Community agencies and resources;
 - (11) Advocacy;
 - (12) The special needs of the children served, differences in the cultural and socioeconomic norms, values and heritage.
 - (13) Cultural awareness;
 - (14) Poverty
 - (15) Techniques to accurately obtain and document information (including report writing skills);
 - (16) Effective communication skills and interviewing techniques;
 - (17) The identification of personal and institutional bias or discrimination as it relates to children and families being served.

- iii) Each participant must observe at least two hours of juvenile court dependency hearings.
 - iv) The CASA program will provide training participants with the following written materials:
 - (1) A copy of pertinent laws, regulations and policies; and
 - (2) A CASA training manual.
 - v) The CASA program provides a minimum of twelve (12) hours of ongoing training per year to volunteers once they are accepted into the program.
 - vi) Attendance at training is considered integral to the volunteer selection process.
- f) Volunteer Selection and Appointment
- i) All volunteers accepted into the CASA program must successfully pass screening and training requirements.
 - ii) The CASA program will notify all applicants in writing of the status of their application. Those not selected will, if possible, be referred to alternative volunteer opportunities more suitable to them.
 - iii) Volunteers are sworn in by a presiding juvenile court judge.
 - iv) The judge determines which cases shall be referred to CASA for assignments and all appointments and assignments must be made by an appropriate order of the court.
 - v) CASA volunteers are assigned, when possible, at the earliest stages of the court proceedings.
 - vi) A CASA should not carry more than two (2) cases simultaneously.
 - vii) Upon the appointment of a CASA to a case, the CASA executive director signs and files a Notice of Assignment with the court and sends copies to the referring judge, caseworker and all parties.
 - viii) The CASA volunteer will have complete and immediate access to all records and documents pertaining to assigned cases.
- g) Volunteer Supervision
- i) The CASA program staff is easily accessible to provide guidance to an active CASA volunteer.
 - ii) The CASA program staff and volunteer will maintain regular contact in order to review progress of the case.
 - iii) The CASA program staff works as a team with each CASA volunteer throughout the life of a case. Together supervisors and volunteers will assess how to proceed with an investigation, identify critical issues and develop case recommendations.
 - (a) The CASA and the CASA case manager will work diligently to address any conflicts that arise amongst themselves, in order to preserve the integrity of their team and their working relationship.
 - (i) If a conflict arises that is unable to be addressed between the CASA and the case manager, either the volunteer or the case manager can contact, in any convenient forum, the program director to seek assistance and advice.

1. The program director can address the conflict in a manner that is in the child's best interest and in accordance with CASA of Allegheny County's mission.
- (b) The CASA and the CASA case manager will work diligently to address any conflicts that arise with regard to recommendations in order to preserve the integrity of their team, their working relationship and to promote the children's best interest.
 - (i) If a conflict arises, the CASA and the CASA case manager will rectify the conflict with a compromise concerning the recommendations. *Any compromise established will not jeopardize child safety, the best interests of the child nor the agency's mission.*
 - (ii) If a conflict arises that is unable to be addressed between the CASA and the case manager, either the volunteer or the case manager can contact, in any convenient forum, the program director to seek assistance and advice.
 1. The program director will address the conflict in a manner that is in the child's best interest and in accordance with CASA of Allegheny County's mission.
 2. If the CASA and the CASA staff are unable to reach an agreement regarding the volunteer's recommendations, an additional report will be submitted to the court under the program director's signature.
- iv) The volunteer must submit all recommendations concerning the case to their direct supervisor in a written report at least two weeks prior to the court review date. The report shall not be altered without the permission and understanding of the CASA volunteer.
- v) CASA program staff is responsible for processing the volunteers' report to the court and parties in a timely manner so as not to jeopardize the best interests of the child.
- vi) Volunteer/staff ratio for supervision of volunteers shall not exceed thirty (30) to one (1).
- vii) The CASA program, including staff and volunteers, has access to legal counsel for consultation or representation, as needed.
- h) Record Keeping
 - i) The CASA office will maintain complete records regarding volunteer advocates.
 - (1) Written records shall include:
 - (a) The volunteer's identifying information and emergency contacts
 - (b) The volunteer's application
 - (c) The volunteer's reference documentation
 - (d) The volunteer's security check documentation
 - (2) Volunteer access to their volunteer file.
 - (a) Volunteers who wish to have access to their volunteer file must submit a written request, with the reasoning for the request, to the program director.

- (b) Volunteer access will be determined upon the discretion of the program director following an assessment of the reasons for the request.
- (c) If a volunteer is permitted to review their volunteer file, they must:
 - (i) Review the file within ten (10) days of the request to the program director.
 - (ii) Review the file in the presence of the program director at one other CASA staff member.
- (d) If the volunteer wishes to make an addition or correction to their volunteer file, they must:
 - (i) Submit a written proposal of the addition or correction to the program director.
 - (ii) The written proposal's admittance into the file will be determined upon the discretion of the program director.
- ii) The CASA office will maintain complete case assignment records including an up-to-date calendar of court hearings, and copies of all volunteer reports and correspondence concerning the case. Case files should be returned to the CASA office when the volunteer is discharged from the case.
 - (1) Written records shall include:
 - (a) Number of children served per year; their race, age and sex;
 - (b) Number of volunteers assigned to cases;
 - (c) Total number of children served to date;
 - (d) Number of cases closed and length of time each case was in the court system;
 - (e) Breakdown of types of cases (number of sexual abuse, physical abuse, neglect);
 - (f) Average length of time children are in out-of-home placement; and
 - (g) Average length of time a child is in foster care from the time a CASA volunteer is assigned to the case until a permanent placement is made.
- i) Volunteer Reimbursement
 - i) Volunteers will be reimbursed for faxes.
 - ii) Volunteers will be reimbursed for parking expenses while at juvenile court.
 - iii) Any extraordinary expenses will be reimbursed at the discretion of the executive director.
- j) Volunteer Discipline and Dismissal
 - i) A CASA volunteer should not become inappropriately involved in a CASA case that could lead to a conflict of interest or a liability issue. Any potential conflicts, issues or failure to perform the duties of a CASA volunteer will be brought to the attention of the program director immediately.
 - ii) Corrective action may be taken if the volunteer's work is unsatisfactory. Corrective action is within the discretion of the program director and may include:
 - (1) Additional supervision

- (2) Reassignment
 - (3) Retraining with possible suspension
 - (4) Referral to another volunteer position
 - (5) Dismissal from the CASA/GAL program
- iii) Volunteers who do not adhere to the policies and procedures of the program or who fail to satisfactorily perform their volunteer assignment are subject to dismissal. Dismissal is within the discretion of the program director.
- (1) A CASA volunteer may be discharged from active CASA service by the program director for any of the following reasons, including but not limited to:
 - (a) The volunteer falsifies personal information that would negatively affect their selection or suitability for CASA volunteer service.
 - (i) The volunteer falsifies their volunteer application or misrepresents material facts during the application, screening, or training process.
 - (ii) The volunteer fails to notify CASA of Allegheny County of any criminal charges or convictions of the volunteer or pending or threatened charges against the volunteer, including but not limited to those involving child abuse, neglect, murder, rape, child pornography, child abduction, kidnapping or a sex offense.
 - (iii) The volunteer fails to notify CASA of Allegheny County of any criminal charges or convictions of the volunteer or pending or threatened charges against the volunteer, including but not limited to those involving the manufacturing, distributing, or dispensing a controlled dangerous substance; or the possession with intent to manufacture, distribute or dispense a controlled dangerous substance.
 - (iv) The volunteer fails at anytime to notify CASA of any charges or convictions of the volunteer or pending or threatened charges against the volunteer, including but not limited to DUI violations.
 - (b) The volunteer takes action without program or court approval which endangers the child, compromises the child's best interest, or is outside the role or powers of the CASA program.
 - (c) The volunteer violates a program policy, court rule or law. These include, but are not limited to:
 - (i) Failing to report allegations of child abuse or neglect concerning the CASA child to the CASA staff, Allegheny County Children, Youth and Family Services or the local authorities.
 - (ii) Failing to report the child's whereabouts to the proper authorities, including CASA staff.
 - (iii) Breaching the mandated standard of confidentiality.
 - (iv) Having unauthorized conversations with the media regarding a case.
 - (v) Taking a CASA child to the volunteer's home.

- (vi) Taking a CASA child from a home/shelter or off an authorized premise without the permission of the parent/family/caretaker, foster parent, group home or residential facility administrator.
- (vii) Transporting a child in the volunteer's vehicle.
- (viii) Engaging in ex parte communication with the court.
- (ix) Giving legal advice or therapeutic counseling.
- (x) Making placement arrangements for the child.
- (xi) Giving money or expensive gifts to the child or family.
- (xii) Establishing any type of personal relationship with any person on the volunteer's case. This includes but is not limited to:
 - 1. Attending social engagements without first consulting CASA staff;
 - 2. Accepting or granting favors (e.g., house-sitting);
 - 3. Offering personal advice;
 - 4. Offering parenting advice; or
 - 5. Engaging in an employer/employee relationship.
- (xiii) The volunteer fails to notify CASA of a loss of automobile insurance, registration or a valid Pennsylvania driver's license.
- (xiv) Failing to adhere to direct instructions of CASA staff regarding any of the policies and procedures of CASA of Allegheny County.
- (d) The volunteer is either unable or unwilling to effectively carry out CASA duties.
 - (i) The volunteer is unwilling to consult with and reach agreement with CASA staff about important developments and recommendations.
 - (ii) The volunteer fails to record findings in case records or reports.
 - (iii) The volunteer fails to complete assignments in a timely manner. Examples are failure to complete an investigation, failure to prepare a written report within a reasonable period of time, failure to attend and testify at court hearings.
 - (iv) The volunteer fails to attend twelve (12) hours of ongoing training per year.
- (2) The CASA volunteer shall be provided with a confidential memo identifying the reason(s) for the dismissal.
- (3) If the case has not been terminated, the executive director shall appoint a new CASA volunteer as soon as possible, and all parties to the case and their representatives will be notified in writing.
- k) Volunteer Evaluation
 - (1) The CASA program will evaluate all volunteers on an annual basis using a standardized evaluation form to review their performance.
- l) Media Protocol

- i) A volunteer shall not discuss their case with any member of the media. A CASA shall not identify the case name they are assigned to or reveal any details about the case to anyone who is not directly related to the case.
 - ii) If a member of the media contacts a volunteer, the volunteer shall decline comment and immediately notify their case manager.
 - iii) A volunteer shall not initiate contact with a member of the media regarding their case. Doing so will be cause for immediate case dismissal.
 - iv) A volunteer may speak to the media on matters that do not relate to a dependency case (e.g., general volunteer duties) only with express permission from CASA staff. CASA staff reserves the right to be present at such interviews; however, the CASA staff can waive this right.
- m) Transportation Policy
- i) All volunteers of the Court Appointed Special Advocate Program of Allegheny County (CASA) are required to have a legal Pennsylvania Driver's license, access to an automobile, and current insurance. A transportation policy must be signed prior to the beginning of active service. The policy is as follows:
 - (1) A vehicle used while conducting the duties of a volunteer advocate shall have a valid title (vehicle code §1111) and be properly registered (vehicle code §1301) and inspected (vehicle code §4703).
 - (2) All vehicles should be properly insured (vehicle code §1786).
 - (3) The volunteer shall possess a valid driver's license for the class of vehicle being operated (vehicle code §1501).
 - (4) The volunteer shall abide by all applicable state traffic laws, including seat belt requirements, and be fully fit to drive, observing over-the-counter and prescription medicine guidelines.
 - (5) No children, family members or foster parents shall be transported by a volunteer for any reason.
 - (6) A volunteer will notify the CASA program director immediately of any situation that arises that affects their ability to abide with this policy, including but not limited to suspension of a driver's license or loss of automobile insurance.

III) Equal Opportunity

- a) CASA of Allegheny County is committed to a policy of equal opportunity in accepting, training and assigning applicants. CASA does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, ancestry, gender, age, marital status, familial status, sexual orientation, disability, or status as a disabled veteran or a veteran of the Vietnam era. CASA will act in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

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