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**FAIRFAX CASA**  
**PROGRAM AND VOLUNTEER HANDBOOK**

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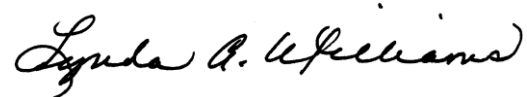
## MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Fairfax CASA staff and volunteers are entrusted with a unique and critically important responsibility to serve the best interests of every abused and neglected child referred to us by the Fairfax County Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court.

Our service goal is to have a sufficient number of CASA volunteers trained and ready to take a case that we will be able to assign a volunteer to every child as soon as possible from the date of referral. We estimate this number of volunteers to be 200 either active on a case or standing ready to take a case when called.

The need of abused and neglected children to have a voice in Court is the beacon that guides all of our activities. We are called upon to be part of a unified team and to give our very best in service to these especially vulnerable children.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lynda A. Williams".

Lynda Williams  
Executive Director

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **ABOUT THIS HANDBOOK**

This handbook outlines the regulations governing CASA organizations in the Commonwealth of Virginia related to the relationship of volunteers to the organization and the management of cases, and provides additional Board of Directors' approved policies and procedures governing Fairfax CASA volunteers and staff. The handbook is to be provided to all volunteers and reviewed during training. Volunteers should seek clarification on any questions about the information contained in this handbook from a Volunteer Supervisor, the Program Manager, and/or the Executive Director.

### **MISSION STATEMENT**

The mission of Fairfax CASA is to advocate for the best interests of each abused and neglected child referred by the Fairfax County Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court (Court) through the promotion and support of quality volunteer representation.

We seek to assure that each child's needs are identified and addressed, with the goal of living in a safe, permanent, and nurturing home.

### **CODE OF ETHICS & CONFIDENTIALITY**

Volunteers and staff associated with the Fairfax CASA program will do whatever is within their power and authority to protect children from harm by any caretaker or person related to cases assigned to CASA. They will conduct themselves at all times in a manner that will serve the child(ren)'s best interests, including maintaining confidentiality as defined in the Code of Virginia and administered by the Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) and Fairfax CASA policies. They will avoid excessive personal involvement and exercise their sworn duty to advocate objectively for children in CASA cases without regard to their own personal or financial interest. They will remove themselves from a case or the program, if necessary, to avoid any appearance of conflict of interest or personal gain.

## **REGULATIONS**

### **QUALIFICATIONS OF VOLUNTEERS**

- 1) CASA volunteers shall be at least 21 years of age.
- 2) CASA volunteers shall have the ability to communicate effectively, both orally and in writing, to prepare court reports, and to provide testimony.
- 3) CASA volunteers shall possess mature judgment, a high degree of responsibility, and sufficient time to assist in advocating for the best interests of the child(ren).
- 4) CASA volunteers shall be able to relate to persons of different cultures, ethnic backgrounds, and socioeconomic status.
- 5) CASA volunteers shall commit themselves to service for the duration of at least one case.

### **VOLUNTEER SCREENING, OBJECTIVES, AND STANDARDS OF CONDUCT**

To protect the safety of the children served and the integrity of the CASA program, and to enable volunteers to become more effective advocates for each child's best interests, the Fairfax CASA program shall screen and process CASA volunteers, set and maintain objectives and standards of conduct, and instruct volunteers in the discharge of their duties as follows:

- 1) Each applicant must provide:
  - a) a complete written application with information about education, employment, and volunteer background; personal experience with child abuse and neglect; three references who will speak to their character, judgment, and suitability for the position; and
  - b) a signed authorization for criminal and Child Protective Services (CPS) background checks and, if deemed necessary, a signed release for contact with a therapist. If the applicant has lived in another state within the past five years, the applicant shall sign a release of information authorizing the organization to obtain a copy of his criminal history record and a copy of information from the central registry from that area or areas. An applicant shall be rejected if he refuses to sign a release of information for appropriate law-enforcement checks.
- 2) Each applicant must be interviewed by a member of the Fairfax CASA staff who will make a recommendation about the applicant's suitability to the Program Manager. The Program Manager will determine who will be accepted for training as a potential CASA volunteer in consultation with the Recruitment and Training Manager and the Executive Director if necessary.
- 3) No applicant with a criminal record of any kind, other than for minor traffic infractions, will be eligible to serve as a CASA volunteer, except upon recommendation of the Executive Director and approval of the President of the Board of Directors. The Executive Director and Board of Directors reserve the right in any circumstances to reject an applicant if in their sole discretion they deem it in the best interest of the program to do so.
- 4) The Fairfax CASA Program will not discriminate against any applicant because of race, color, sex, age, religion, national origin, disability, marital, or veteran status.
- 5) Applicants who are accepted for pre-service training will be notified in writing prior to the beginning of the training session. Applicants' suitability for the program will be continually evaluated by staff members during the training period.

- 6) Prior to receiving a case assignment, volunteers must have met all required qualifications listed on page 4 and have completed the following:
- Pre-service training of not less than 30 hours including, but not limited to:
    - Roles and responsibilities of a CASA volunteer
    - Court process
    - Relevant state laws, regulations and policies
    - Relevant federal laws, regulations and policies, including the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), and the Multi Ethnic Placement Act (MEPA).
    - Confidentiality
    - Cultural competency
    - Child abuse and neglect
    - Child development
    - Effective Advocacy<sup>1</sup>
  - Training completion interview, if deemed necessary.
  - Fingerprinting.
  - A minimum of three references submitted and checked.
  - Driving record checked along with proper verification of insurance coverage.
  - Criminal record checked.
  - Child Protective Services record checked.
  - Signed Completion of Training Exercise; CASA Oath and Statement of Confidentiality; and Volunteer Commitment form.
  - Participation in Oath.
  - Court Observation.
- 7) In accepting or carrying out a case assignment, a CASA volunteer shall have no associations, either professional or personal, which create a conflict of interests or the appearance of such a conflict with the volunteer's duties as an advocate. A CASA volunteer shall not be assigned to a case of a child whose family has a personal or professional relationship with the advocate.
- 8) The CASA volunteer will engage in interdisciplinary cooperation including participation in the development of a plan of action in conjunction with other local agencies and professionals.
- 9) The CASA volunteer may conduct interviews of children; however, CASA volunteers are specifically prohibited from questioning or inquiring of the child information regarding a precipitating incident or allegation involving child abuse and neglect.
- 10) The CASA volunteer shall not become involved inappropriately in the case by providing direct service delivery to any parties that could:
- a) lead to a conflict of interest or incur liability; or
  - b) result in a child or family becoming dependent on the CASA volunteer for services that should be provided by other agencies or organizations.

Examples of inappropriate involvement include:

- taking a child home or sheltering a child in the home;
- giving legal advice or therapeutic counseling;
- making placement arrangements for a child; and,
- giving money or expensive gifts to the child or family.

- 11) The CASA volunteer shall discuss all recommendations concerning the case with his/her supervisor prior to submitting recommendations to the court. The program manager shall review and sign off on all court reports and recommendations contained therein prior to their submission to court. The program manager and case supervisors may not alter court reports or recommendations without the knowledge and agreement of the CASA volunteer.<sup>2</sup>

### **VOLUNTEER CASELOAD**

To ensure effective management and high quality of service to all cases, the maximum number of cases to which a volunteer may be assigned is two (2) children or two siblings groups without submitting a rationale to DCJS for approval.

### **STAFF TO VOLUNTEER RATIO**

To ensure proper supervision of volunteers, the maximum number of volunteers to be supervised by Volunteer Supervisors and the time spent with volunteers shall be controlled as follows:

- 1) The staff to volunteer ratio calculated and reported each quarter shall not exceed one full-time equivalent staff to 30 volunteers who are assigned to active cases.
- 2) If this volunteer to supervisor ratio is to be exceeded for any reason, the rationale must be submitted to and approved by DCJS prior to implementation.
- 3) The exact number of hours each staff person spends in supervision, as opposed to administrative or other duties shall be surveyed regularly.

### **REVIEW, INVESTIGATION, AND DISPOSITION OF COMPLAINTS CONCERNING CASA VOLUNTEERS; DISMISSAL OF A CASA VOLUNTEER**

Fairfax CASA expects that volunteers will act in accordance with applicable laws, regulations, ethical standards, CASA policies and procedures, and their program volunteer commitment. However, the Executive Director, with evidence presented by the Program Manager, may discharge a CASA volunteer where the volunteer has acted outside the scope of state laws and regulations and National CASA Standards.<sup>3</sup>

If any entity or person outside of Fairfax CASA believes that a CASA volunteer may have violated her/his obligation to act in conformity with these standards, a complaint may be filed with the Executive Director of Fairfax CASA. The complaint should be in writing and specify in detail the identity of the volunteer and act/occurrence precipitating the complaint.

The Executive Director will investigate the allegations set forth in the complaint. If appropriate, interviews with witnesses shall be undertaken while maintaining the confidentiality of the child(ren) involved. Also, the subject volunteer shall be interviewed and advised of the grievance process that follows. A report regarding the investigation and findings/recommendations shall be prepared and presented to the President of the Board of Directors within sixty days (60) days from receipt of the complaint. The report shall also recommend the action to be taken in response to the complaint.

Within thirty (30) days of receipt of the Executive Director's investigative report, the Board of Directors shall consider the Executive Director's report, findings, and recommended action. The Board will take appropriate action.

A written record of the action taken by Fairfax CASA shall be maintained in the organization's files.

### **ACCEPTANCE AND PRIORITIZATION OF CASES**

To ensure cases involving children in the greatest need of services are assigned expeditiously to appropriate CASA volunteers, the Fairfax CASA program shall accept, prioritize, and assign cases as follows:

- 1) An initial case priority assessment will be recorded on the Hearing Information form by a CASA volunteer or staff member based on case records and/or court proceedings.
- 2) The Program Manager will review the case and establish priority based on information supplied by the Hearing Information form, social workers, the Guardian *ad litem*, and other parties to the case. Factors influencing the priority of a case may include, but not be limited to, the potential risk to the child(ren), history of abuse, family stability, age of child(ren), and the emotional stability of the child(ren) and/or guardians.
- 3) The Program Manager, in consultation with the Volunteer Supervisors, will select a CASA volunteer for case assignment based on the CASA volunteer's experience, preferences and personal circumstances, geographic factors, and individual attributes that can serve the best interests of the child(ren).

### **CONFIDENTIALITY OF CASA FILES**

To protect the privacy of the child(ren) and families served, the Fairfax CASA program will ensure confidentiality through procedures that are consistent with federal, state, and local laws and regulations as follows:

- 1) A policy of strict case confidentiality, except when necessary in the regular performance of duties pertaining to the case, and a discussion of appropriate conduct related to this policy will be reviewed and stressed in training programs and newsletters.
- 2) All volunteers and staff members must sign a Confidentiality Statement, which will be filed in the personnel file.
- 3) The Program Manager is responsible for ensuring that each CASA volunteer returns all case files to the Fairfax CASA office if said volunteer withdraws or is removed from a case or when the case is closed.
- 4) Based on The Library of Virginia Records Management Division, General Schedule No. 27, Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Program Records must follow the prescribed schedule for the retention and disposition of records:
  - Case records are retained until a juvenile reaches the age of 21. Once the juvenile reaches the age of 21, that juvenile's record is pulled and the local department of social services is notified about pending record destruction. If no response is received within 30 days, the record will be destroyed by shredding or pulping.
  - CASA program statistical reports are retained for one year after submission of the report, and then destroyed.
  - Volunteer records pertaining to: (i) files of applicants accepted and completing training will be retained for three years after the volunteer's departure from the program, then destroyed by shredding or pulping; (ii) files of applicants not accepted or not completing training will be retained for three years after the last action, then destroyed by shredding or pulping; and, (iii) records of a volunteer's pre- and in-service training are retained for three years after departure from the program, then destroyed.

## **VOLUNTEER GRIEVANCE PROCESS**

When a CASA volunteer believes that he or she has been treated inappropriately, unfairly, or that a CASA policy has not been applied, the volunteer should schedule a meeting with his or her Volunteer Supervisor to discuss the concern. If that does not resolve the matter or if the issue relates directly to the Volunteer Supervisor, the volunteer should schedule a meeting with the Program Manager to discuss the concern. In either case, the Volunteer Supervisor or the Program Manager will promptly review the facts and issues related to the concern raised and advise the CASA volunteer of action, if any, to be taken to address the concern. If the issue continues to be unresolved, the CASA volunteer should schedule a meeting with the Executive Director.

## **TRANSPORTING CHILDREN**

The CASA volunteer may transport a child only when:

- 1) In the course of completing the requirements for face to face contacts with assigned children;
- 2) The child is age six (6) or older unless accompanied by a parent, guardian, foster parent, or other individual or Department holding legal custody;
- 3) The volunteer has a valid driver's license and current auto insurance, and the volunteer's driving record has been checked through the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) obtained during the screening process and every year thereafter and approved by the Executive Director. The Executive Director shall notify individuals with DMV offense records, by registered mail/return receipt requested, that they will be barred from transporting persons related to Fairfax CASA, including children, parents, professionals, or other CASA volunteers, if the volunteer has driving violations recorded by the DMV within the last five (5) years related to driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs, reckless driving, or any offense that places other occupants of a vehicle at risk. Consent to transport is automatically revoked when the volunteer is removed from the case. Additionally, the Executive Director shall determine whether the circumstances of any driver's license revocation or suspension warrant the individual being barred as set forth above. After the time period that triggered the bar has ended, the Executive Director shall obtain a current driving record for the individual to determine whether the bar should be lifted; and,
- 4) Permission has been given by the individual or department holding legal custody (e.g. parent/guardian, Department of Family Services) and a consent for the CASA volunteer to transport a child form has been signed.

## **VOLUNTEER PERFORMANCE EVALUATION**

The Fairfax CASA program shall conduct regular performance evaluations for volunteers relating to standards of conduct and their responsibilities to praise accomplishments, review deficiencies, and set goals for future performance.

- 1) New volunteers will receive an informal evaluation after the initial court appearance and approximately six months thereafter.
- 2) All volunteers will receive a written performance evaluation at least once annually, and Volunteer Supervisors will provide informal discussion regarding performance on an ongoing basis.
- 3) Volunteers must complete 12 hours of in-service training annually to achieve yearly re-certification.
- 4) Each volunteer will be given the opportunity for an exit interview prior to leaving the CASA program.

## REPORTING SUSPECTED CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

To ensure maximum protection for children served, Fairfax CASA staff and volunteers are mandated reporters as set forth in Virginia Code Section 63.2-1509, and shall report suspected child abuse and/or neglect in ongoing cases as follows:

- 1) If knowledge of suspected abuse and/or neglect is obtained during working hours, a report must first be made to the Child Protective Services Unit of the Department of Family Services and, then, to the CASA volunteer's Supervisor or the Program Manager.
- 2) If knowledge of suspected abuse and/or neglect is obtained after working hours or during weekends or holidays, a report must first be made to the Hotline of the Department of Family Services (1-800-552-7096) and then to the CASA volunteer's Supervisor or the Program Manager.
- 3) In situations involving imminent danger to a child, the volunteer must immediately contact the police. The CASA volunteer may, if allowed, accompany the child along with the police or proper authorities. Under no circumstances should the CASA volunteer place him/herself at risk in a physically violent situation; shelter the child in the volunteer's home or other shelter; or, fail to report the child's whereabouts to authorities.
- 4) The CASA volunteer must document events immediately, including the date, time, place, persons involved, what actions were taken, and what agencies/persons were contacted.

## RESPONSIBILITIES FOR CASES

To provide consistency in the representation for children in court proceedings; to facilitate communication among the involved persons; and to effectively investigate, advocate, report, monitor court order compliance, and assist responsible parties acting in the child(ren)'s best interest, Fairfax CASA volunteers and staff shall carry out the following responsibilities:

- 1) The Executive Director or Program Manager will send, by whatever method they deem effective, a confirmation letter to all the parties involved in the court case, identifying the case by name and court number and naming the assigned CASA volunteer, as soon as the CASA volunteer accepts the case. The confirmation letter may also be sent to other involved parties. Recipients include, but may not be limited to the following:
  - Assistant County Attorney
  - Guardian *ad litem* (GAL)
  - Department of Family Services personnel
  - Attorney(s) for parent(s), step-parent(s), or other parties to the case;
  - The guardian(s) or other individual(s) having legal or physical custody of the child
- 2) The CASA volunteer will establish contact with each party to introduce him/herself, clarify the role of the CASA volunteer, and make appointments for an interview, if deemed necessary.

### FOOTNOTES OF CHANGES MADE RELATED TO NATIONAL CASA COMPLIANCE:

<sup>1</sup>Added specific information on ICWA based on Standard 7, C-11

<sup>2</sup>Added specific policy that prohibits supervisors from altering report based on Standard 7, 7d.

<sup>3</sup>Specified which persons have authority to terminate or discharge a volunteer based on Standard 7, F.3