

National CASA Association Performance Measurement Summary – Child Trends Final Report

Summary of Final Recommendations

The National Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) Association is committed to serving all abused and neglected children who need our advocacy. In addition to expanding our program, National CASA is committed to the design and implementation of a performance measurement system across local and state CASA member organizations. Local capacity to collect process and outcomes data is essential to measuring performance across the entire membership and demonstrating program effectiveness. It is also important in the current financial climate in that many private foundations and federal funding streams are requiring not only stronger proof of program effectiveness but also the implementation of more evidence-based or evidence-informed programs and practices.

In August 2013, National CASA began working with Child Trends on the development of a performance measurement system, an important step toward becoming an evidence-based program. The first phase of the project focused on understanding existing data collection practices (both at the local CASA and National CASA level), as well as work being done across the CASA network on performance measurement and other data-related work. Child Trends conducted in-depth interviews with stakeholders, administered a web-based network-wide survey, analyzed the data collected, and disseminated findings to the CASA network via webinars. Child Trends then developed a final report and presented findings at the National CASA Annual Conference.

This summary of Child Trends’ findings can help you, as a state or local CASA member organization, to understand how powerful performance measurement systems can be, what we learned about data collection across state and local organizations, and Child Trends’ recommendations for National CASA moving forward.

Why is measuring performance and building an evidence base important?

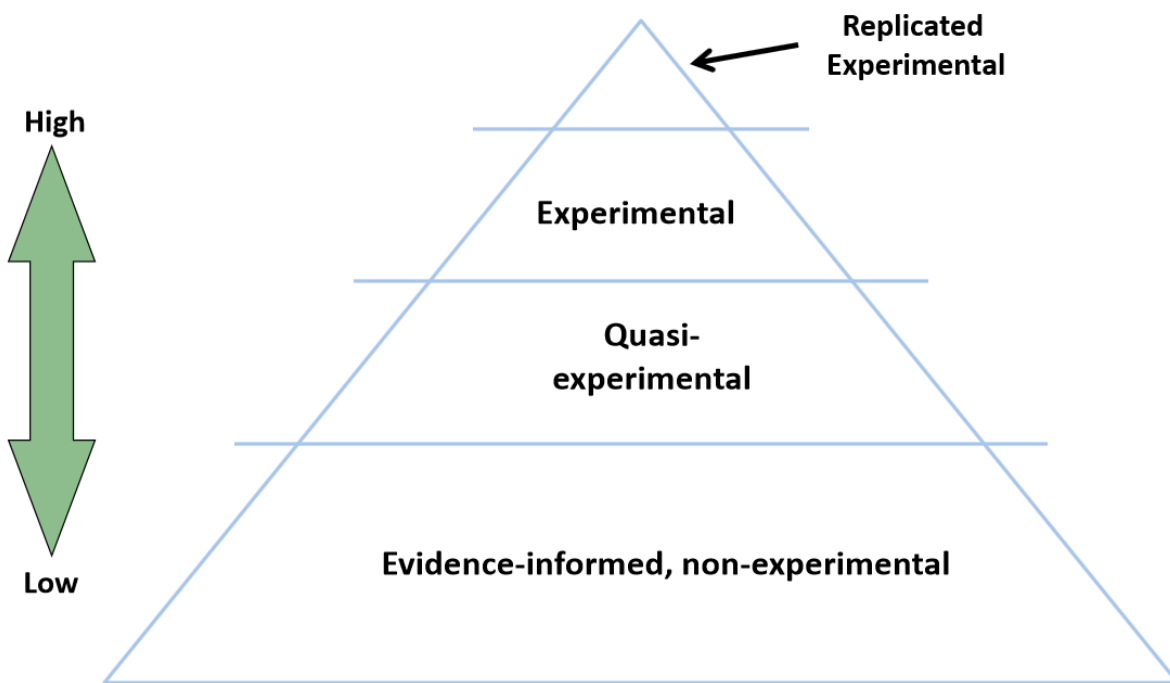
The work that you do in facilitating, supporting and promoting court-appointed volunteer advocacy for children and youth in foster care is incredibly important. Your work aims to change and improve the lives of some of our most vulnerable children. Through building an evidence base, National CASA will be able to identify best practices in advocacy efforts, what children benefit the most from working with a CASA volunteer, and under what circumstances CASA volunteers are most effective. Armed with this knowledge, you can provide better services to the children you work with. Such knowledge will also help you to better train, support, and equip your volunteers for making the most positive impact. Further, you can confidently explain to funders the precise impact of your program and where or how additional funds can provide the most efficient benefit to children in foster care.

Is there any existing evidence on CASA’s effectiveness?

Figure 1 (also shown in Final Report) shows not only the potential range of evidence, but also the relative likelihood of programs having a particular study as part of their evidence base. At the “top”

of this triangle are the most rigorous—and rarest—evaluations. These not only use a randomized controlled trial (RCT), acknowledged to provide the “gold standard” of evidence of a program’s impact, but indicate that there have been multiple RCTs with impacts demonstrated across these studies. Evidence-informed, non-experimental studies comprise the largest rung, but also the lowest level of evidence.

Figure 1. Levels of evidence



The CASA model has limited evidence supporting a number of different outcomes and outputs—in particular, fewer placements and increased receipt of services. This evidence places the CASA model squarely in the base of the evidence triangle. Existing studies show positive outcomes on increased services and a greater likelihood of adoption; however, the existing studies are limited by design. In addition, the outcomes examined in these studies vary greatly, and it is unknown if these are the outcomes that National CASA views as the essential elements of the CASA model.

What is the current data collection landscape across local CASA organizations?

One of the first steps in building a stronger evidence base is understanding what data local and state programs are collecting, how those data are being used, and the challenges, needs, or facilitators for increased usage of the data. The survey and interviews mentioned above examined several different aspects of data collection in CASA/GAL programs. Here’s an overview of what programs currently do with data:

1. *CASA programs are currently collecting a lot of data* on both volunteers (e.g., demographics, training, hours, etc.) and children (demographics, permanency goal, placement, etc.). The survey

found that there is more consistency across programs in the type of volunteer information collected than child information collected.

2. *Collecting data can be time consuming.* When asked about the perceived level of burden of data entry, ranging from “not burdensome at all” to “very burdensome,” the most common response for all groups was “somewhat burdensome.”
3. *Not all programs are happy with current data systems, and many are making changes.* Programs were also asked the extent to which their current data collection system meets their needs. There was not one system reported as meeting the majority of its user’s needs “very well.” For the most commonly used systems, between one half and two-thirds of respondents reported their current data system meets their needs “somewhat well.” Nearly a quarter of programs indicate that they are planning to change data systems in the next year.

The primary reasons for changing data systems include the system not aligning with data collection needs, not aligning with reporting needs, or not being customizable. “Other” responses for changing data systems include a lack of technical support for the system or a change to a new statewide system. Programs get the data they collect into a usable format by hand-counting, using pre-written or customizable reports, or by using Excel.

4. *Programs use data in a variety of ways.* The most common use is reporting requirements, followed by demonstrating program effectiveness and making program improvements. Data use also seems to reflect data priorities; when asked to identify the most important way in which they use data, respondents identified reporting requirements and demonstrating program effectiveness as the most important.
5. *Programs want more support.* Approximately one-third of respondents report receiving some training on data collection and use, while other respondents report utilizing peer-to-peer support or receiving funding that supports data collection. Desired areas of support include data analysis and guidance on how to collect data.

What are current data limitations?

The survey also highlighted current data limitations to take under consideration in our endeavors to become evidence-based. Responses indicated a lack of capacity in terms of staff skill level and time, lack of knowledge of appropriate measures, and inadequate data collection systems.

What would network programs like to do with data?

In general, programs want to do more with the data they already collect. Close to three-quarters of programs would like to report on more meaningful outcomes or be able to work with data in different

ways. This desire to do more with data is also reflected in the number of programs currently undergoing some type of performance measurement initiative.

Some programs may be limited in their ability to do more with their data because of limited time and resources. The survey showed that 90 percent of programs use the data they collect for reporting requirements, whereas only 75 percent use data for demonstrating program effectiveness. If programs have reporting requirements tied to their funding sources, it makes sense that their energies and priorities will go to those requirements, which may not focus solely on demonstrating effectiveness.

Respondents differed in their data collection priorities. While the survey respondents identified three priority domains for data collection (permanency, placement, and child well-being), there was not one domain that stood out in the survey responses.

What does National CASA plan to do next?

Across the CASA network, there is strong interest in developing the evidence base for the CASA model. To do so, Child Trends recommends that National CASA be more systematic in its approach. The recommendations outlined in the Final Report begin this process and provide a better understanding of what programs across the network are doing with regard to data collection and analysis, as well as the challenges these programs are facing in this work. Additionally, National CASA has begun to establish a common language around outcomes and outputs and has indicated an interest to network programs in moving forward with both performance measurement and outcome evaluation. Child Trends outlined what the evidence-building process might look like for National CASA.

Step 1: Develop a Logic Model. When thinking through building an evidence base, one of the most fundamental steps is developing a logic model, which will allow National CASA to think more strategically about how program resources and activities can be connected with desired outcomes. The logic model acts as a point of reference in all subsequent steps of becoming evidence-based—including determining the key outputs for performance measurement, establishing outcomes and how to measure them, and ultimately thinking through the design of an evaluation.

Step 2: Select Performance Measures. In order to track progress, National CASA will need to choose measures of success that align with the various outcomes (short, intermediate, and long-term) outlined in the logic model. Much of the work in determining potential measures has occurred as a result of National CASA's current work with Child Trends.

Step 3: Moving towards becoming Evidence-Based. Finally, the National CASA network offers an opportunity to build a strong evidence base for the CASA model through development of a performance measurement system. The development of this system lays the ground work for evaluation, in particular, a rigorous design, such as a randomized control trial (RCT), by monitoring program performance over time.

What can my local or state program do next?

This process may take us some time. We want to work hard at each stage to build the right foundation for performance measurement and building an evidence base. So please be patient with us as we work toward the development and roll out these new measures and systems. During this process, we may reach out to you for additional input and feedback on the continuing work.

The development of National CASA's logic model will provide templates for state or local program logic models, which can then be modified for your organization and goals. When these tools are available, we encourage you to develop your own model to guide your organization's work.