



# Making the Case for the CASA Model

## Statement of the Problem

The National Court Appointed Special Advocate (National CASA) Association has worked extensively in the child welfare field for over three decades. In that time, the organization has identified the strong need to bolster and expand existing one-on-one advocacy programs serving abused and neglected children in foster care. The reasons for specializing with this underserved and high-risk population are the documented challenges and barriers they face when compared to other child groups. Research provided in this section will support the risk factors facing foster youth center around the complete absence of trusted adults in their lives. Because of this loss, they are more likely to face juvenile delinquency, incarceration, substance abuse, and impaired school performance than the general youth population. And for children of color, the research in this section will highlight their increased vulnerability once caught in the foster care system.<sup>1</sup>

Although the risks and challenges are significant for those in the foster care system, studies have found that children with trusted adults acting as advocates encounter much improved outcomes. As detailed below, CASA/GAL advocates lead to increased resources and a greater likelihood of permanency for the children served. Children who have permanent families have significantly reduced risk factors than those aging out of foster care without a permanent home. As the most consistently present, caring, and well-trained adults in foster children's lives, CASA advocates not only keep children safe now; they also help children develop the resiliency to remain safe and move into

successful lives.

### Lack of Trusted Adults before Foster Care

At any point in time, there are more than 400,000 children in foster care and more than 600,000 children pass through the foster care system because of abuse, neglect or abandonment each year.<sup>2</sup> These children are in the system because the adults tasked with protecting them and ensuring their safety, permanency and well-being have fallen far short in their duties. As multiple studies show, adverse childhood experiences, including abuse and neglect, have a particularly strong influence on adolescent health, educational attainment, teen pregnancy, alcohol abuse, illicit drug use, mental health, and performance in the workforce.<sup>3 4 5</sup>

These adverse experiences are often times exacerbated when their parents inadvertently abandon their children due to incarceration. The number of female inmates under the jurisdiction of state or federal prisons grew by 21 percent between 2000 and 2010. It is estimated that 52 percent of all women are single parents, increasing the likelihood that their children will enter the child welfare system upon their arrest.<sup>6</sup> One study reports that 11 percent of incarcerated mothers in state prison have a child in a foster home or other state care. Some estimates indicate that as many as one in eight children who are subjects of reports of maltreatment, and investigated by child welfare agencies, have parents who were recently arrested. The average sentence of an incarcerated parent is 80 to 100 months, and the longer a mother's sentence, the longer her children remain in the foster care system and the less likely they are to be reunified.<sup>7</sup>

### Lack of Trusted Adults once in Foster Care

Once in the system, the physical and psychological trauma associated with prior

deprivation, coupled with the loss of family through separation, and a lack of a consistent trusted adult while in foster care, create a unique high-risk population. As the child welfare system struggles to address their issues and stabilize their unstable lives, they face the threat of chronic disruptions and multiple foster care placements (three on average per child).<sup>8 9</sup> When a singular family structure (like a foster home) becomes unavailable to them, children in the foster care system are often relegated to more institutional settings. Nearly 57,000 children in the child welfare system are living in group placements. Four in 10 of those children have no mental health diagnosis, medical disability or behavioral problem that might warrant such a restrictive setting.<sup>10</sup>

As a child's lack of permanence continues, their options diminish and their outcomes become more daunting. These youth, on average, have a 47 percent greater rate of juvenile delinquency<sup>11</sup> and those with more than one out-of-home placement are five-to-ten times more likely to enter the juvenile justice system than youth outside of the foster care system.<sup>12</sup> This population of youth also have high rates of mental, physical, and developmental health problems,<sup>13</sup> in addition to developmental or social difficulties that can impact academic performance, the development of trusting relationships, and other long-term outcomes. Only 46 percent of foster youth graduate high school, compared to 84 percent of all students nationwide<sup>14</sup> and only 15 percent attend postsecondary institutions, with only about one percent completing college.<sup>15</sup>

For children of color, who are disproportionately represented in foster care, the likelihood of achieving safety, permanency, and well-being is an even greater challenge. American Indian and Alaska Native children are the most overrepresented racial and ethnic group in foster care based on their total percentage of population in the country<sup>16</sup>

and these youth enter the system with distinct geographic and cultural sensitivities as well. Only 16 percent of the child population in this country is African American, but African American children make up 33 percent of the children in foster care.<sup>17</sup> African American children are 2.7 times more likely to be placed into foster care than Caucasian children and they will wait in foster care an average of 30 percent longer than other children in the system.<sup>18 19 20</sup> These children need advocates who have received pre-service and ongoing training that focuses on cultural competency, recognizing disproportionality, and securing permanent families.

### Lack of Trusted Adults after Foster Care

As foster children exit the system (with many emancipating or “aging out” of it) they are at a higher risk of entering a cycle of poverty, unemployment, and homelessness. The average incomes of foster youth and former foster youth are substantially below the poverty level, and the lingering issues of unemployment and poverty mean that many foster youth will become homeless at least once in their lifetime.<sup>21</sup> According to a national research study, 27 percent of the homeless population in the United States spent some period of time in foster care.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, the cyclical nature of abuse and neglect has a significant impact on communities, especially considering findings that parents who are former foster youth are twice as likely to have their own children placed into the foster care system.<sup>23</sup>

### The Costs of a Lack of Trusted Adults on Society

In addition to the toll abuse and neglect takes on the children directly affected is the financial burden placed on society in addressing the issue. A recent Centers for Disease Control (CDC) study found that the average lifetime cost per victim of nonfatal child maltreatment includes: \$7,728 in child welfare costs, \$6,747 in criminal justice costs

and \$7,999 in special education costs.<sup>24 25</sup> Children who are left to languish unnecessarily in group placements cost seven to 10 times the cost of placing a child with a foster family.<sup>26</sup>

The entry of foster youth into the juvenile justice system during or after care, the potential future need for public assistance based on poverty and/or homelessness, and the potential for lack of educational attainment, all represent an economic cost to the community.<sup>27</sup> The economic and social costs of child abuse and neglect include direct costs such as hospitalization, and other costs that are not caused abuse or neglect, but are often linked to it, such as; adult criminality, mental health care, lower academic achievement, and lost work productivity. These costs annually total \$124 billion nationwide.<sup>28</sup>

### **The Support for a Trusted Adult in these Children's lives**

Numerous studies cite the need for effective interventions to address the significant risk factors and issues faced by foster youth. Equally, research suggests that mentoring positively impacts children with multiple risk factors, including children in foster care.<sup>29</sup> Further, having a mentor as a youth in foster care is associated with improved adult outcomes.<sup>30</sup>

Youth in foster care who have mentors have been found to have fewer depressive symptoms, less stress, and greater satisfaction with life by the time they turn 18.<sup>31</sup> They have also exhibited better overall health, increased educational attainment, and diminished physical aggression, suicide risks, and risk of sexually transmitted infections.<sup>32</sup>

Emerging research in the field of child development now provides a new

understanding of the lasting impact a consistent caring adult such as a CASA advocate can have on a child's well-being. National CASA Association has incorporated, into its training for advocates working with older youth, research from the University of Michigan that focuses on the ways that caring adults can help children envision both positive and negative futures and plan to achieve the positive one. This approach results in long-lasting improvements in educational achievement, better mental health outcomes, and more resiliency for the foster child.

Additionally, National CASA has paid particular attention to prominent research around the value of conveying a 'success mindset' to children, which focuses on influencing a child's chances of overcoming adverse childhood experiences by focusing on key beliefs. Consistency, support, belief in the foster child's future, overcoming obstacles – all of these essential components are aided by the presence of a CASA advocate and they are significant factors in a child's academic and life success.

#### **National CASA Advocates are the Trusted Adults for Children in Foster Care**

Research demonstrates that children in foster care appointed to CASA/GAL advocates experience fewer out-of-home placements, and significantly more services than children without a advocate, thereby providing opportunities to improve academic, developmental, health and, ultimately, life outcomes.<sup>33</sup> In addition, foster children received an increase in connectivity and positive outcomes, as well as the likelihood of permanency when mentored by a CASA/GAL advocate.<sup>34</sup>

One evaluation, funded through the Packard Foundation, found that CASA advocates actively connected children to the appropriate wraparound services, and spent the largest proportion of their time in direct one-on-one contact with their appointed youth.<sup>35</sup> The study also found that at-risk foster youth with a CASA advocate receive

significantly more services to address their needs than children without one. Further, families of children with a CASA advocate receive more services.<sup>36</sup>

Another study, conducted by the University of Houston and Child Advocates, found that children with a CASA/GAL advocate are more likely to pass all courses in school, less likely to have poor conduct, and less likely to be expelled.<sup>37</sup> These studies, along with pre-and post-Youth Life Skills Assessments (YLSA) of foster youth conducted by CASA/GAL programs (based on the Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment) affirm National CASA Association's assessment of the overwhelmingly positive impact of the CASA model on improving outcomes for foster youth.

While the CASA model has been demonstrated to improve outcomes for at-risk and high-risk foster youth, the current capacity of the CASA/GAL network has resulted in a fairly level rate of service. Currently, of the 600,000 children passing through the foster care system each year, only 40 percent receive a CASA/GAL advocate. The courts have expressed an increasing demand for additional CASA/GAL advocates. As the service to the children increase, the outcomes for these youth should increase as well. Diminished number of placements while in foster care, coupled with enhanced services to each individual child based on his/her needs, will lead to greater resiliency in this acutely vulnerable population. Through long-term service by the advocate, these children and their families will receive a better chance of permanency.

For 32 years, CASA programs have provided high quality mentor advocacy to abused and neglected youth in foster care and at-home settings. External studies have shown that CASA mentor advocacy improves a number of outcomes for abused and neglected children. The current capacity of CASA programs has led to relatively consistent levels of

service to at-risk and high-risk youth in recent years and the ability to expand this capacity through the recruitment of new advocates will lead to a greater number of youth served.

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