

Growing the Alaska CASA Program



**Perceptions of Alaska's CASA Volunteers,
Guardians ad Litem, and CASA Program Coordinators:
Volunteer Impact, Program Strengths,
and Barriers to Growth
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The fundamental role of Alaska Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) programs is to recruit, train, and support community members to serve as volunteer advocates for youth who have experienced abuse and neglect and are involved in Alaska's child welfare system. The purpose of this project was to obtain feedback about Alaska CASA's four programs – Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, and Valley CASA – from a purposive sample of local CASA volunteers, Guardians ad Litem (GALs), and CASA Program Coordinators (PCs). Project leaders conducted focus groups and individual interviews to identify program strengths and participant views on how to grow and enhance CASA programs throughout the state. The project was conducted between November 24, 2019 and January 28, 2020.

The project sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the positive outcomes achieved by CASA volunteers in Alaska?
2. What effective supports and strengths already exist within Alaska CASA Programs?
3. What changes will allow Alaska CASA to grow and positively impact more children?



Photo credit: National CASA/GAL

Findings

1. What are the positive outcomes achieved by CASA volunteers in Alaska?

Participants shared several positive attributes they associated with CASA volunteers. The first key perception was that CASA volunteers performed a variety of tasks that were extremely important to child-wellbeing and which could not always be completed by the CPS worker or the paid GAL, due to high caseloads and impossible work demands. Participants observed that CASA volunteers were able to prioritize a small number of children, had frequent contact with their assigned youths, developed a strong knowledge of each youth and the details of their case, provided continuity and consistency and supported several important aspects of GAL and CPS casework. The second key perception shared by participants was that the assignment of a CASA volunteer resulted in improved individual youth and case related outcomes. Participants credited CASA volunteers with getting needed services in place for their assigned youths, helping them maintain and create new family connections, increasing placement stability and improving permanency outcomes.

2. What effective supports and strengths already exist within Alaska CASA Programs?

Several existing programmatic structures were identified as essential to the success of each program. Participants saw pre-service training and continuing education as key contributors to program success. They also identified the role of the PC in facilitating communication between GALs and CASA volunteers as an integral part of each program. Some GALs shared that the number of CASA volunteers they were willing and able to partner with was contingent upon the PC's ability to perform this crucial duty. Another critical PC role described by participants was the careful job PCs performed while matching CASA volunteers to the right cases. They perceived volunteer case assignments to be a nuanced and essential role of PCs. Participants recognized that these PC duties were both time consuming and extremely important for a successful program.

3. What will allow Alaska CASA to grow and positively impact more children?

Participants identified some current obstacles to growth as well as programmatic shifts that could help alleviate some of these obstacles. Feedback from participants suggested that CASA volunteers and GALs would benefit from additional program support defining the role of the CASA volunteer in each case and preventing or addressing conflicts and breakdowns in communication between CASA volunteers and GALs. GALs and CASA volunteers also suggested that the CASA volunteer role should be more flexible, believing this would both attract and keep more volunteers. Another widely shared perception was that participants graduating from pre-service training still required additional support and ongoing instruction, which GALs said they did not have the time to provide. Several participants recommended creating a graduated level system as a possible way to address this concern, in which CASA volunteers might start out with fewer or less complex duties. The model participants proposed would then allow CASA volunteers to graduate up to a level where more responsibilities would be added to their role. Finally, many participants shared the opinion that CASA volunteer pre-service training was overly focused on the function of the legal system at the cost of other topics, which participants felt were crucial and more common to CASA volunteer work.

Recommendations

1. Alaska CASA should continue providing volunteer services to abused and neglected youth in state custody.
2. Alaska CASA should develop a system for graduated levels of volunteer engagement and specialization.
3. Pre-service training for volunteers should focus less on the legal process and provide trainees with more practical knowledge about their other roles, such as working with OCS, services for youth, and school advocacy.
4. Alaska CASA programs should be assessed to determine what financial resources will be needed to facilitate program growth and enhancement.



Photo credit: National CASA/GAL

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BACKGROUND

Public child welfare systems across the United States have become defined by high caseloads, limited resources, and strict timelines for achieving family reunification or developing alternative permanency plans (Phillips & Mann, 2013). According to the most recent Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) data, an estimated 672,594 children and youth were served by the foster care system in 2019 (U.S. Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau, 2020). Of those children and youth residing in foster care on September 30, 2019, only 55% had an identified long-term case goal of family reunification.

Within these overwhelmed child welfare systems, it can be difficult for children and youth to receive needed individualized monitoring, support, and advocacy. It was in response to these unmet needs that the role of the Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)

was first developed in 1977 (National CASA/GAL Association for Children [NCASA], 2020). Today, over 950 CASA programs operate in 49 states, serving an estimated 271,800 children annually (NCASA, 2020).

CASA volunteers play a unique role in state child welfare systems in the United States. The federal Child Abuse and Prevention Act (CAPTA) mandates that every child who is the subject of child maltreatment proceedings is appointed a legal advocate to learn about the child's situation and needs and to represent their best interests in court (Public Law 115-424). This advocate may be a paid professional guardian ad litem (GAL) or they may be a volunteer advocate, often known as a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteer. CASA volunteers are community members who have been recruited and trained to advocate on behalf of abused and neglected children and youth. They regularly visit with their assigned children and youth and gather information from child protective services (CPS), foster parents, family members and other entities such as schools and service providers. CASA volunteers appear at child welfare proceedings and share information and recommendations with the court about

Nobody had any idea that this little girl wasn't getting any affection, any contact, and everything was going backwards for her. That was the CASA that discovered that. The CASA was the one that was able to see the differences and know that this is not her normal. And so, that was huge. Without that CASA, that little girl, who knows? Who knows what would have happened being in that placement? Nobody knows.

- Program Coordinator

the needs, wants and best interests of their assigned children and youth. They provide child and youth victims with someone outside of CPS to advocate for their best interests.

Each state creates its own statutes and protocols regarding youth representation in child welfare cases, and the role and structure of CASA and GAL programs also varies from state-to-state. In Alaska, the state-operated Office of Public Advocacy (OPA) is mandated to assign a GAL to every youth placed in the temporary custody of the State. Most of these youth are assigned a paid OPA employee to serve as their GAL.

When an assigned GAL – or occasionally another legal party – identifies a youth or sibling group they feel will require a higher than average amount of attention or time, they may approach their local CASA PC and request that a CASA volunteer be assigned. If the PC can identify a CASA volunteer who is available and would be a good match to work with the identified youth(s) and the requesting GAL, then the PC will assign that volunteer to the case.

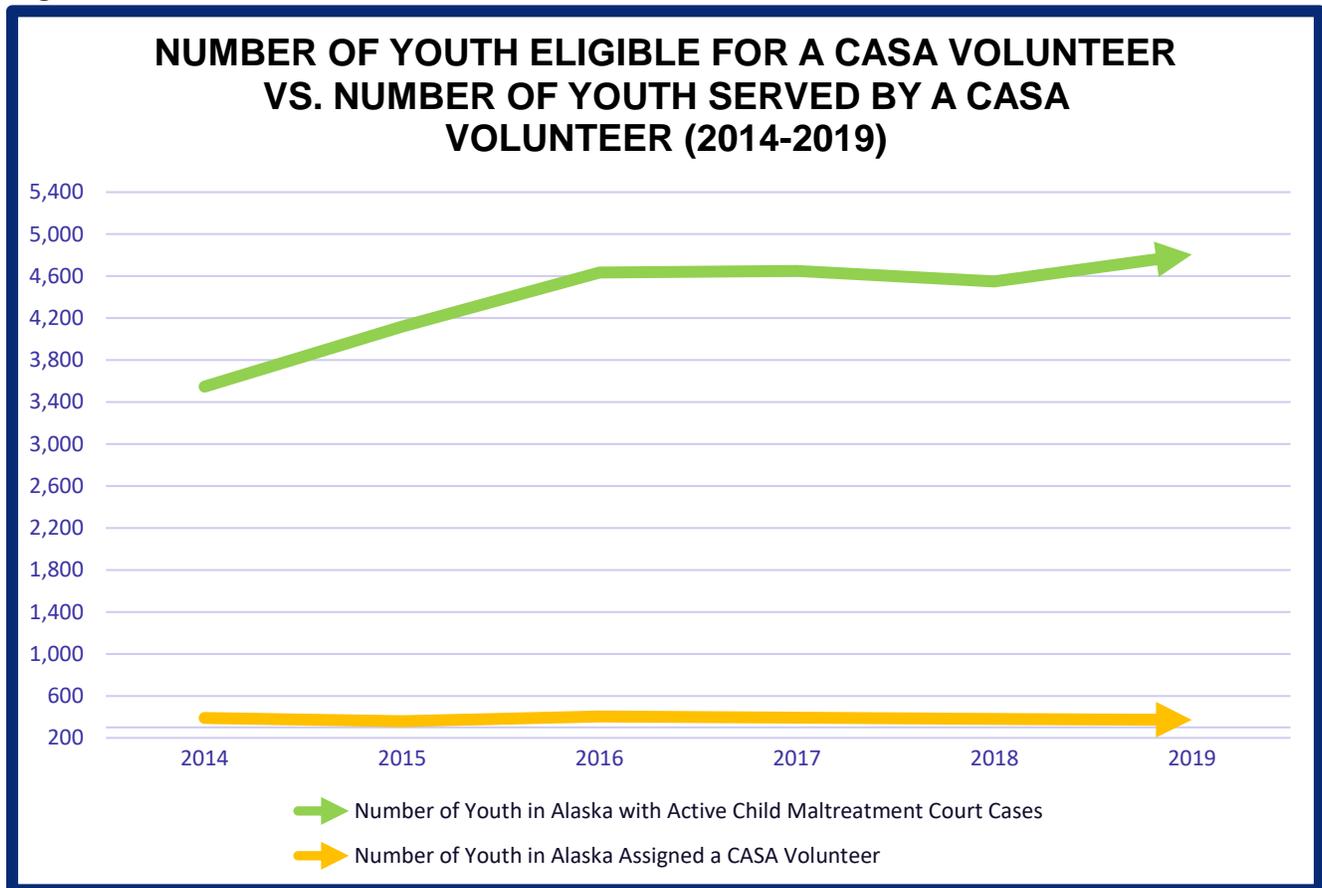
In Alaska's model, when a CASA volunteer is assigned to a youth, the CASA volunteer and the assigned GAL work together as an advocacy team, with the GAL serving as the CASA volunteer's primary supervisor. Unlike paid GALs who often carry high caseloads, CASA volunteers are typically assigned to work with only one or two youth or sibling groups at a time. When paired on a case, the GAL and CASA volunteer share the responsibility of gathering information, monitoring their youths' cases, facilitating communication with other legal parties and significant entities and advocating in and out of court for what they find to be in the best interest of each youth.

Once the case is assigned, the GAL takes over the day to day communication with and general supervision of the assigned CASA volunteer. PCs are still responsible for checking in to see that CASA volunteers are fulfilling their primary volunteer duties, such as seeing their assigned youth at least twice per month. Additionally, PCs can be enlisted to step in if a conflict arises between a GAL and CASA volunteer or if a CASA volunteer needs support.

Currently there are four local CASA programs operating within Alaska that are located – in order of program size – in Anchorage, Mat-Su Valley, Fairbanks, and Juneau. Each program is staffed by a single full or part-time program coordinator (PC), who is responsible for volunteer recruitment and screening, volunteer pre-service training, case matching and assignment, ongoing volunteer support, regular continuing education, and other program management duties.

Between the years 2014 and 2019 the number of children and youth in Alaska's child welfare court rose by over thirty-five percent (J. Robson, Personal Communication, October 27, 2020). As shown in Figure 1, those who were eligible for CASA services far outweighed the actual number served by a CASA volunteer, leaving most children and youth potentially underserved.

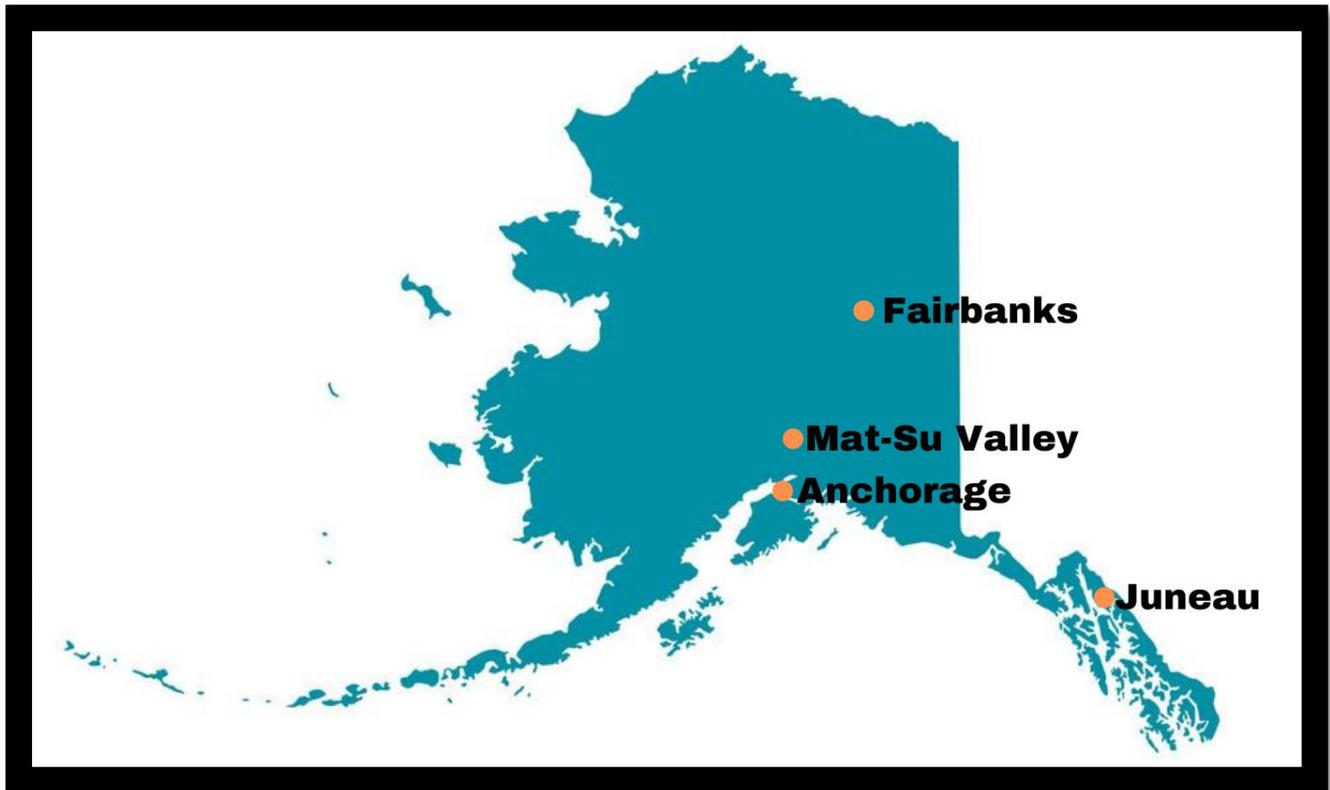
Figure 1



CASA programs across the U.S. are searching for ways to increase the number of volunteers their programs can recruit and retain to allow for more youth in care to be served (Texas CASA for Children, 2020; Michigan State CASA, 2020; Oklahoma CASA Association, 2020). According to Gershun and Terrebonne (2018), some of the issues impacting lower than desired numbers of CASA volunteers are related to inadequate funding, not enough population to draw from - particularly in rural areas - and/or a lack of family or family court judge support for the use of volunteers.

Similarly, Alaska CASA is seeking to bring CASA volunteer services to more of Alaska's victims of child maltreatment. The need for more CASA volunteers has become increasingly pronounced over the past several years due to a rapid influx of youth entering Alaska's child welfare system (J. Petrie, Personal Communication, March 26, 2020). At present, only an estimated 8% of Alaskan children and youth who come into state custody due to cases of abuse and neglect are assigned and served by a CASA volunteer (J. Petrie, Personal Communication, June 26, 2020).

ALASKA CASA PROGRAM LOCATIONS



PROJECT DESIGN

Purpose

Alaska CASA desires to expand their volunteer programs across the State to provide services to more child and youth victims of abuse and neglect. The purpose of this project was to assess current strengths and barriers to expansion of Alaska CASA programs from the perspectives of CASA volunteers, GALs, and PCs.

The key questions driving this project were:

1. What are the positive outcomes achieved by CASA volunteers in Alaska?
2. What effective supports and strengths already exist within programs?
3. What changes will allow Alaska CASA to positively impact more children?

Methodology

Sample & Recruitment

Participants were recruited through agency-based e-mails and through word of mouth inviting all current CASA volunteers, GALs, and Program Coordinators. Further, all participants were provided with both verbal and written informed consent prior to participation and all project protocols were reviewed and approved by the UAA Institutional Review Board.

Measures & Data Collection

The project team conducted focus groups with CASA volunteers and GALs and individual interviews with PCs. All focus groups and interviews occurred face-to-face facilitated by one or two members of the project team. A total of eight focus groups and four interviews occurred (two focus groups and one interview in each program location). One or two project leaders conducted the individual interviews of the four PCs in person (n=3) or via Zoom (n=1). A series of open-ended questions designed to elicit discussion about the three project questions were asked in each group and follow up questions were also posed. All focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and uploaded into Atlas.ti Cloud for analysis. Basic qualitative methods were used to analyze the data including the collaborative development of initial codes and subsequent identification of findings.

Analysis

The first and third authors collaboratively coded two transcripts to establish the initial code book, with all subsequent transcripts coded by the third author. After coding was completed, all three authors met to review the codes and to identify key perceptions that were relevant to the pre-established project questions.



PROJECT FINDINGS

Participants

A total of 73 individuals participated in focus groups (CASA volunteers n= 46; GALs n=23) or individual interviews (PCs n=4). Participants were recruited from the four urban and semi-urban communities in Alaska where CASA programs operate. Individual demographic data were not collected from participants. However, based on general program data, focus group participants represented just under 40% of all CASA volunteers in the State. Further, the 23 participating GALs represented nearly 83% of all GALs in locations with CASA programs and all state PCs were included.

Findings

In addressing the three project questions, participants shared feedback that fell under four key findings:

1. ***CASA volunteers fill critical gaps in an overburdened system***, which discusses the contributions and benefits created by the volunteers themselves.
2. ***CASA volunteers make an impact on case outcomes***, which describes the perception that assigning a CASA volunteer to a case can positively influence outcomes for children.
3. ***Effective supports and strengths of Alaska CASA programs***, which highlights the successful elements of the current program structure in Alaska, including the role of the program coordinator at each site.
4. ***Challenges to and solutions for program growth and enhancement***, which articulates barriers to growth and recommended programmatic shifts needed for program expansion and enhancement.



Photo credit: National CASA/GAL



Photo credit: National CASA/GAL



Photo credit: National CASA/GAL

Finding 1: CASA Volunteers Fill Critical Gaps in an Overburdened System

Part of the perceived essential nature of the CASA volunteer role was that they were able to perform tasks that contributed to child well-being, which could not always be completed by the CPS worker or the paid GAL, due to high caseloads and impossible work demands. Participants viewed CASA volunteers as essential to shoring up these aspects of the casework in a variety of ways.

There are those kiddos who are really gonna need attention that I'm not gonna be able to give them.

– GAL

CASA Volunteers Prioritized a Small Number of Children

Child welfare practice is a world of mounting and conflicting priorities in which an individual child can get pushed to the bottom of the list. Participants felt that because CASA volunteers could focus so closely on their assigned children, they made each child a priority both within the scope of their own volunteer work as well as with the other professionals involved in the child's case. Not only were CASA volunteers generally well-positioned to prioritize their assigned children and youth over competing work responsibilities, they were also able to place the needs of these children over all of the competing needs of everyone else involved in the case. One CASA volunteer described their role in the following way:

I do feel like, as a CASA, I kinda spotlight my child in the system. I think that that's kind of my role, honestly, is that I kind of make mine float to the top above the others because I am assigned to it. I have the time to sit and pester people and make sure that their [the child's] needs are getting met. And it makes me feel bad for the kids that don't have a CASA.

CASA Volunteers Had Frequent Contact with Their Assigned Youth

Another point echoed by many participants was that CASA volunteers saw their assigned children regularly when other professionals simply could not, given their many other responsibilities and daily crises pulling them from one case to the next. In Alaska, CASA volunteers were expected to see their assigned children at minimum twice monthly. Regarding this requirement, one GAL stated:

We are lucky to see 'em once every six months, to be quite honest. And they [CASA volunteers] build those relationships. And they're able to go to school meetings or the other appointments and get more in with the counseling or whatever service provider. So, I do think that they make a very positive impact on our youth, and therefore a positive impact on the case.

CASA Volunteers Knew the Children and the Case Detail

Having regular contact and a trusting relationship were thought to contribute to the fact that CASA volunteers often knew the children, their needs, and all the case details better than any of the other professionals involved. As a GAL explained:

What we have discovered is that in many cases, a CASA is the only person who knows what's going on in every single situation. There's nobody else --- the GALs are so busy. Our first case we had 12 or 14 different [CPS] caseworkers. The files were boxes thick.

CASA Volunteers Provided Continuity and Consistency

In a public child welfare system that faces increasing and high rates of caseworker turnover, PCs, GALs, and CASA volunteers all recognized the importance of the consistency provided by CASA volunteers in children's lives and in case outcomes. As one CASA volunteer described her experience:

I'm four and a half years in with it [the case] and it's been through two venue changes. There have been five GALs. There have been countless social workers. Kids have moved around a lot. Kids have been in mental health facilities and I really have been the only permanent person over those four and a half years, so in that way, just being the same person for a time. So now I have a real relationship with them... I think that's been the most valuable thing for them, even though I have not been in the same location as them. But at least I've been the same person over time.

CASA Volunteers Supported and Supplemented Under-Resourced GALs

Professional GALs carry highly demanding and large caseloads, allowing them little time to meet with and get to know their individual assigned youth. The impact of their workload was described by a PC in this way:

GALs are spending so much time in court. They're not getting to see these kids. And if they do, it's a drive-by. Quick, great, gotcha, check, off we go, next. And I feel for them because I know they're maxed out.

According to participants, job demands fundamentally restricted the amount of time GALs could realistically spend focused on any one youth. Their high caseloads limited their ability to visit and get to know every assigned youth or to learn all the details of their situation and needs. Competing demands, such as preparing for major court hearings, made it difficult for GALs to prioritize completing all their needed tasks. One GAL reflected:

I have 107 kids. I can't contact every school, every clinician, every doctor, so if we have the CASA that's available to do that, it's super helpful.

Another GAL estimated that CASA volunteers saved them at least 30 hours of time throughout the life of a case in completing tasks for each youth served. Participants frequently discussed several tasks that CASA volunteers completed in support of both the children they served and the GAL. One GAL observed:

They did all their visits. They went to their doctor's appointments. They talked to their therapists. They talked to their schools. They went to IEP meetings. If we were getting ready to transition the kid on a home visit, a trial home visit, they were going to the parent's house... They were able to pop in on supervised visitations and see how that – so they did everything outside of the legal proceedings for me. And it was amazing.

CASA Volunteers Kept GALs Up to Date

Participants also reported CASA volunteers were especially helpful in providing GALs with needed updates on assigned youth and identifying issues that GALs needed to prioritize. One CASA volunteer described this case information gathering for use by GALs as an important part of her role, stating:

I feel like the eyes and ears kinda. I can spend time with the kid one-on-one one and then give her updates so that she can make recommendations in court. That's kinda what it feels like.

CASA Volunteers Assisted an Overburdened System

It was nearly universally remarked upon that CASA volunteers frequently carried out some duties that were the responsibility of CPS workers (e.g. family visits, getting consents signed, making referrals happen) by default and in the name of better serving the needs of their assigned children and youth. For example, as one CASA volunteer described:

I got very caught up in doing a lot of the things that others should have been doing, but I felt that I had the time to do it that they didn't have, and I wanted to make sure that my CASA children had the benefit of having those things. So I went and found family members that were outside, I supervised visitations with the parents, I did a lot of things, because I wanted to make sure that the children had all of the opportunities and they were – their opinions mattered to me, and what they wanted.

CASA Volunteers Had the Full Picture When Others May Not Have

CASA volunteers were strongly credited with having the big picture of a child, his or her circumstances, and needs. Because of this knowledge, they were able to bring meaningful information to other parties involved in the case, including the GAL. One CASA volunteer described this as part of her role saying:

I feel like that's a lot of what I do is making sure everybody is not working in their silos and don't know the bigger picture of what's going on.

CASA Volunteers Supported GALs in Preparing for Court

In many cases, CASA volunteers were described as very helpful to GALs when preparing for important court hearings. Because CASA volunteers were so close to all aspects of each case, they held information that no other single party typically had. CASA volunteers were cited as being particularly helpful in preparing case timelines and summaries as well as providing details across all aspects of the case, as one CASA volunteer described:

That's the first thing we did is sit down and make a timeline from the very beginning. No one had done that. No one had had time to look at the whole case. I think a really important job that CASAs have is that we connect all the different threads for that kid.

Because of their regular contact with assigned youth and their supports, CASA volunteers were reportedly particularly well-positioned to contribute to case planning, as well as providing GALs a complete summary of case facts when preparing for court hearings. A GAL explained:

[The CASA volunteer] keeps me in the loop. She comes to court maybe half the time, which is great when she comes. If not, I just use what she provides me and I'm able to give the judge an accurate picture of what things look like for the kid. So, if they do our visits for us, that really, really helps. That's been my takeaway.

Many of the participants cited examples of CASA volunteers as being tenacious and successful in locating family members for children, as one PC related:

I have another CASA, everyone on the case was saying they could not find dad. The CASA found the dad.



Finding 2: CASA Volunteers Positively Impact Case Outcomes

Several project participants noted a number of improved outcomes related to both individual children and case progress as a direct result of CASA volunteer involvement. These improved outcomes, in aggregate, are believed to also have contributed to improved permanency outcomes. More specifically, outcomes directly benefiting children included increased placement stability, family connections, and delivery of needed services. Increased efficiency and timeliness of certain aspects of case management may lead to better long-term permanency outcomes.

CASA Volunteers Effectively Advocated for Needed Services

Participants described CASA volunteers as strong and informed advocates for their assigned children. They advocated for needed services, as one GAL described:

I think without CASA, not us but without the CASA program, they wouldn't have been able to do that [maintain regular sibling contact] because the stress on foster families to get everything else done and just getting the siblings together is just one more thing that seems to fall by the wayside. - GAL

I think that they are good advocates when additional services need to be put in place - -- they can help push for that or get that set up and meet with those service providers.

CASA Volunteers Maintained and Created New Family Connections

Across participants, maintaining and facilitating family connections was consistently cited as a favorable outcome of CASA volunteer engagement. CASA volunteers were perceived as being particularly helpful in maintaining sibling relationships and contact between children placed in different foster homes. Participants also explained that CASA volunteers were effective in engaging other family members to become involved with their assigned children. A PC told about one example:

I had a CASA who has one little girl on her caseload and reunification is not gonna work. This CASA located and talked with family members in another state... and my CASA was able to talk with them, what was going on with the case... and the family flew up to Alaska and the CASA ... was able to organize and facilitate a gathering at a school playground for this little girl to meet her relatives that were from out of state.

CASA Volunteers Increased Placement Stability

Through well-developed relationships and increased time, consistency, and effort, CASA volunteers were credited with contributing to children's placement stability. One GAL observed:

The other thing I wondered is if there's ever a correlation between a case having a CASA and being able to maintain placement, just because a CASA is in the home so much more often and I feel like CASAs are really more of an emotional support sometimes for placement if they do have that connection. And I have a case right now where I believe these kids would have to move already if it wasn't for the work and efforts of the CASA to maintain their placement.

CASA Volunteers Improved Permanency Outcomes

Achieving permanency is a principal goal for each child within the child welfare legal system. CASA volunteers were described as having positively contributed to children's permanency both in reunification cases and in cases that ended with alternative permanent placements. One GAL described the CASA volunteer's role in successful family reunification:

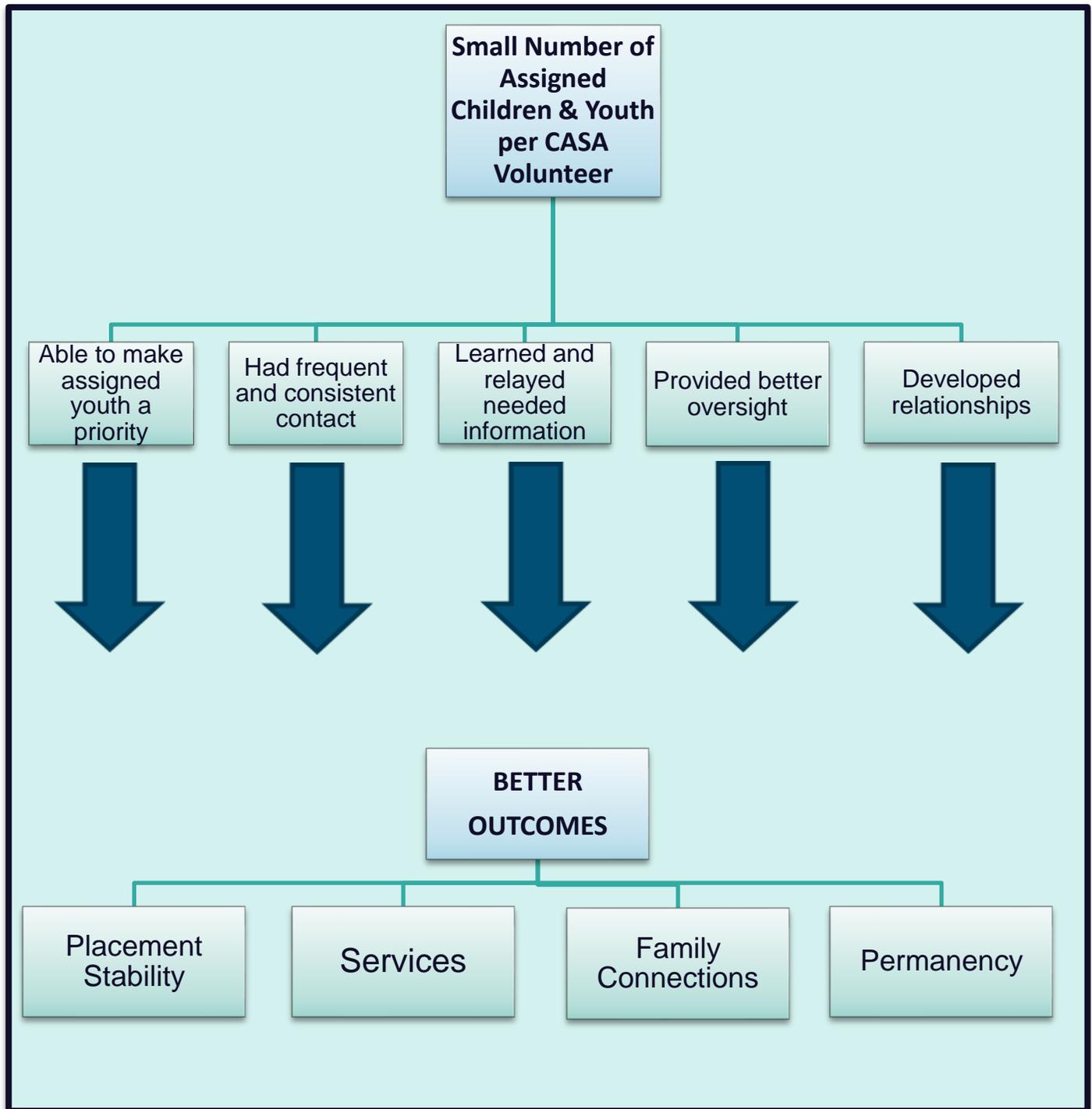
I think the CASAs on reunification cases are really, really essential to getting to permanency, because you have somebody who's made a commitment to family contact or contact with the child twice a month. And when you're talking with somebody who's on a trial home visit, you know you're going to have eyes on that kiddo and that situation twice a month. I think that it does help us [GALs] to have the confidence to move a kiddo into a trial home visit.



Photo credit: National CASA/GAL

As seen in Figure 2, the data from this project highlights a number of ways that CASA volunteers positively contributed to youth in care through building and maintaining long-standing relationships, assisting the overburdened child welfare system, and championing the voices of the youths they were working with. Program participants reported that children served by CASA volunteers experienced improved outcomes.

Figure 2: Model of CASA Functioning and Impacts



Finding 3: Effective supports and strengths of Alaska CASA Programs

Project participants identified several programmatic structures that they believed contributed to the overall success of Alaska CASA programs. Identification of effective programmatic elements was further broken down into the following participant feedback: (1) Appropriate training was an essential part of program success; (2) The PC role was key to facilitating critical communication and to overall program success; and (3) Successful case assignment relied on careful matching between the CASA volunteer, child, and GAL based on the unique qualities of each case.

Appropriate Training was Essential

After successful recruitment of prospective volunteers, the first role that PCs played with new CASA volunteers was to facilitate and oversee their pre-service training and orientation. This 30-hour training is based on the National CASA organization's training curriculum and is enhanced and regionally contextualized by each PC.

In speaking about the importance of the initial training, one CASA volunteer stated that it was essential to develop realistic expectations for new CASA volunteers. In addition to the pre-service training, PCs set up regular, most often monthly, continuing education for CASA volunteers, and acted as a clearinghouse to share information about other relevant training occurring elsewhere that may be of interest. Participants viewed both the initial and ongoing training as essential to the success of CASA volunteers. One CASA volunteer stated:

[They have] provided us, you know, great training in the beginning, and then continued monthly support, newsletter information...I mean, I think it's an amazing program with incredible support. And so, I mean, that's one of the things that keeps me going, to answer another question, a previous question, but just the incredible volunteer support.

There was also recognition on the part of most project participants that, in addition to pre-service training, topic-specific and more focused continuing education was needed for CASA volunteers to be successful, and PCs reflected this in their thoughtful and creative approaches to engaging everyone in the program in ongoing learning. One PC stated:

I realize I don't know all the ins and outs of how agencies like OCS operate. So, I do have a lot of assumptions about: this should happen or that should happen... So, the CASA program kinda helping me be realistic about my expectations is helpful. - CASA Volunteer

I've been sending out each month different ways for them to meet their continued education. Sending out different links to training, PowerPoints, articles, anything that I can do for them to get them to meet that continued education, I send out for them.

The PC Role was Key to Facilitating Communication and to Overall Program Success

Another identified and important role PCs played was to facilitate the relationship between GALs and their assigned CASA volunteers. Specifically, GALs across all programs expressed that they struggled to effectively supervise CASA volunteers, because they did not have time to train them and continuously respond to their needs. One stated:

But for me, the way that [the PC] manages that CASA team that we have, she's really that in between person. And without that role, I probably couldn't handle as many, because it would be constantly meeting.

PCs reportedly assisted overtaxed GALs by responding to basic questions from CASA volunteers, providing access to case-related paperwork, answering procedural questions, brainstorming case ideas and working to support their volunteers' growth and development. The tasks of facilitating communication between CASA volunteers and GALs and checking in on case progress were cited as being especially important, and PCs were aware of this need. When there were communication challenges between GALs and CASA volunteers, PCs stepped in to provide problem-solving:

I have some CASA volunteers who don't hear from their GALs as frequently as they would like, so how I remedy that is I arrange coffee times with them, and I meet with them, and then I email the GAL what updates that I've got for them. So that's how I help on the side of the CASAs and some of their frustrations.

PCs also fielded questions from CASA volunteers and determined whether they could assist the volunteer directly as a mechanism to reduce the burden on GALs. Some GALs saw this aspect of the PC role as crucial to their ability to effectively utilize a CASA volunteer:

I could work with as many [CASA volunteers] as they would give me. But I say that, because [our program coordinator] is a rocking out CASA coordinator and filters through questions and finds out answers and goes and gets them.

When volunteers' needs were case specific, PCs helped steer the issue to the assigned GAL. PCs also followed up with CASA volunteers if they learned that the volunteer was not communicating back to the GAL:

I see something and I'm gonna pick up the phone or I'm gonna pop in an e-mail saying, 'oh', or, 'Hey, this if you could follow-up on this.' Or 'I remember that the GAL had asked you that, could you get anything on that?' Just sort of as an extra support for them, maybe relief for the GAL.

PCs regularly assessed the relationships between GAL and CASA volunteer dyads and attempted to ensure that both entities had what they needed to function as a solid team. Feedback from the project suggests that sustaining a high level of support from PCs is integral to maintaining and growing successful Alaska CASA programs.

In addition to the ongoing training and support they provided to CASA volunteers and GALs, PCs also described being responsible for several other duties, including recruiting and screening potential volunteers by conducting information meetings, and following up with prospective volunteers with phone calls, emails and individual interviews.

PCs spoke about wanting to expand their programs, increase the diversity of their volunteer pool, and develop specialized programs for their volunteers. However, with all their current responsibilities, none of the PCs interviewed felt that they had the time or capacity to significantly expand or modify their programs.



Effective Case Matching was Essential for Successful GAL/CASA Partnerships

Participants perceived volunteer case assignments to be a nuanced and essential role of PCs. All of the PCs who were interviewed indicated that they took special care in matching CASA volunteers to cases by considering the unique needs of the case, as well as the preferences, styles, and personalities of the GAL and the prospective CASA volunteer. One PC stated:

I don't assign cases randomly. It's a careful process for me 'cause I want to make sure that the GAL and the CASA get along well and have like-minded personalities. For example, I have one CASA who needs a lot of attention, wants a lot of feedback, and I know what GALs will offer that to her.

PCs reported often deferring to GALs who requested a CASA volunteer on a particular case and worked to identify a volunteer who would be a good fit. This was described as a time-consuming role for PCs, requiring them to build strong relationships with both CASA volunteers and GALs, while also carefully screening cases and applying their own expertise to make a match:

The GAL will say they need, or they'd like a CASA on a particular case and, or if somebody says I just need help, I ask them to give me two or three cases that they are interested in having somebody on. So, I'll take those cases, I'll read through the files then I'll write up a summary of each one and send it to whoever I think is an appropriate match for that.

PCs, GALs, and CASA volunteers all perceived this process of careful matching to be crucial to the success of their programs and further acknowledged that doing so required significant case knowledge and relationship building on the part of the PCs.



Photo credit: National CASA/GAL

Finding 4: Challenges and Solutions for Program Growth

In exploring recommended programmatic shifts needed for program expansion, three key participant perceptions were identified in the data: (1) CASA volunteers and GALs needed help addressing and preventing conflicts and breakdowns in communication (2) Developing graduated levels of volunteer engagement and possibly specialized volunteer roles may increase effectiveness and increase the recruitment and retention of CASA volunteers; and (3) More targeted and individualized training for CASA volunteers was needed, especially training that had a hands-on, developmental, and long-term approach.

Addressing and Preventing Conflicts and Breakdowns in Communication

Based on participant reports, there may be a need to further explore and remediate negative perceptions about the CASA program and a reluctance to utilize volunteers by some GALs.

For example, the data suggested that GALs felt CASAs created additional work for them, sometimes failed to maintain needed communication, were often underprepared, did not understand the realities of the child welfare system, and sometimes disagreed with or undermined the GAL's case position.

In Alaska CASA programs, GALs may elect to utilize CASA volunteers. If they do, they are able to choose how many CASA volunteers they will supervise at any given time, which means that Alaska CASA's growth is dependent on the willingness of GALs to supervise more CASA volunteers. One CASA volunteer observed that a major barrier to program growth was the number of GALs who were currently unwilling to work with CASA volunteers stating:

But the biggest problem now that I'm learning more about the framework and what's going on in our state is that there are a lot of GALs that won't take CASAs, and to me, ... we're looking at trying to serve as many children in Alaska as we can. There's this brick wall and how can you expand a program if you have no GALs under which these CASAs are going to report?

You'll notice no one here has said, 'I really need someone at court to do legal advocacy.' That's not what we need. But there's so much emphasis in the CASA program as a whole on that court advocacy, legal advocacy piece. We've got that covered.
- GAL

Unmet or differing expectations contributed to several of the frustrations expressed by both CASA volunteers and GALs. These expectations often revolved around the nature of the GAL/CASA dyad. Participants expressed confusion or conflicting perceptions about what the working relationship between a CASA volunteer and GAL should entail. Some participants felt that CASA volunteers left pre-service training having expectations about their role that did not align with the duties their assigned GALs needed or wanted them to perform. There were GALs who expressed having the expectation or desire for their assigned CASA volunteers to play a more limited role than that which they were trained to perform. Other GALs felt comfortable delegating more responsibilities to the assigned CASA volunteer. The differing opinions and preferences among GALs made it difficult for some CASA volunteers to enter a new case with realistic expectations about what they should be doing.

Several GALs and CASA volunteers emphasized the need to clearly define and communicate their roles and expectations at the beginning of and throughout a shared case. CASA volunteers and GALs who expressed positive working relationships with one another often credited their success to having clear expectations of one another, as one participant put it:

I found that for a CASA, you're kind of a little bit clueless on what they [different GALs] want. I was lucky enough that I started working with a Guardian ad Litem who clearly told me what she wanted, and I loved that about her. I stayed with her because we worked well together. We knew what to expect from each other and I think that was the other thing, building that relationship with the same CASA and knowing exactly what they need.

Expectations around communication were another common source of concern expressed by both CASA volunteers and GALs. Some CASA volunteers talked about situations where they expected or needed more contact than the assigned GAL was able or willing to have with them. One CASA volunteer shared how little contact they had with their assigned GAL, stating:

I send in reports and they're hardly acknowledged. It's very interesting, because one of my bright-eyed CASA ideas was work together for better outcomes, and so that has been hard, that part of it.

At the same time, some GAL participants described feeling frustrated by what they perceived to be unrealistic expectations about their communication with assigned CASA volunteers. These GALs spoke about needing CASA volunteers to have a better understanding of the realities faced by GALs with 100-plus child caseloads. As one GAL explained:

It's just that then when I get the information, which is super helpful, if I – my experience has been that if I'm not immediately enthusiastically thanking her, she gets angry. And I just can't – again, it's not 'cause I don't appreciate it. It's literally: 'Oh, cool, that e-mail.' But there's all these other five that I have to respond to right away.

For some CASA volunteers, there were times when they felt ignored, undervalued, or that their opinions were not considered by their GAL supervisor. GALs spoke about knowing that CASA volunteers were valuable, but not having the capacity to have adequate or timely enough contact with them. The same was true of their ability to monitor whether their assigned volunteers were fulfilling their duties. Some GALs spoke about needing more program support overseeing CASA volunteer compliance and ensuring that CASA volunteers were regularly updating them about their shared cases. As one GAL reflected:

I think it would be good if there is some kind of system that you could count on that stuff coming in every month. Because like [another GAL] said, we don't have time to remind people to go do that.

GALs also shared experiences where CASA volunteers disappeared from a case without notice. This was cited by some of the GALs interviewed as the main reason they were no longer willing to work with CASA volunteers. One GAL recounted their experiences, saying:

I got burned literally three times in a row back to back. They [the assigned CASA volunteers] just disappeared and ghosted me, and I like to know what's going on in my cases. I think that's part of why I do the job. I do it because I know everything that's going on, and when I don't, and I have to play catch up, and go to court, and then I'm the one that is answering to the judge about what's happening in the case and I don't know, that really upsets me quite a bit because I'm not doing the best job that I can.

More than one GAL pointed out that the damage caused by a CASA volunteer dropping their case was worse when it took the GAL a long time to realize that the volunteer was no longer active. The perceived inability of GALs to maintain sufficient communication and oversight with their assigned CASA volunteers represents an opportunity for Alaska CASA to develop and implement additional methods of program support, which may increase GAL and CASA satisfaction and effectiveness.

Develop a System for Graduated Levels of Volunteer Engagement & Specialization

Both GALs and CASA volunteers suggested that a possible solution to addressing CASA volunteer shortages was to make the role of a CASA volunteer more flexible, believing this would both attract and keep more volunteers. They noted that the role of a CASA volunteer included a wide variety of tasks. For example, CASA volunteers might be making a family connection one day, working with the social worker to get a mental health referral the next, and later be required to be in court or contribute to court reports. For many CASA volunteers, some of these tasks were attractive and interesting while others were not. However, there was reportedly no formalized mechanism for a CASA volunteer to specialize or focus just on the tasks that they were most skilled or interested in. Many believed that CASA volunteers could benefit from having an opportunity to be recognized and utilized for their strengths without

being pressed into doing tasks that didn't meet their skill set, interests or level of availability. One PC suggested this possibility:

I think if we had CASAs that had specific roles, that just do home visits, that just do searches for children... If we had specific roles for CASAs. They're not just all CASAs with the same defined role.

Some CASA volunteers reportedly struggled with the time commitment required for them to participate in court. More than one CASA volunteer expressed their inability to take a case or their frustrations with having a case, because they had great difficulty making the court hearings. One volunteer stated:

And that's kinda been my problem with being a CASA. 'Cause I can't do the court dates. I'm gonna join via teleconference now if I can. But I can't just go sit in court for however long. And so being able to maybe do something else like that would be something that I would be interested in. Or other people I know might be interested that can't take the time off work.

Another GAL participant commented on the benefits that could result from focusing on volunteer expertise both in terms of volunteer utilization and retention, explaining:

We have nurses that are CASAs that understand medical stuff. We could have them go through the medical files. And so they don't – I think we lose them because they don't want to take the case. The stuff with the kids breaks their heart. But they have the expertise to – there's ex-schoolteachers. They know who to recommend for – I almost wonder, can we out of those people create even a consult team? Or somebody who says, 'Hey, you know what, I'm retired. I got five hours a week I could give you. What do you guys need? Do you need me to file?' Right? If I just had somebody – honestly. They want to volunteer. They want to do something good for kids. And we spent all that money training them.

Other participants talked about how providing non-advocacy roles to CASA volunteers was a possible way to reduce volunteer attrition as one GAL remarked:

I think the other piece of this is a way to hang on to volunteers that are burnt out from their case and just can't stand another heartache of some two-year-old who just got sent home with somebody who only has not been using heroine for six months. And they can't do that anymore, but they have a lot to offer. And they have a lot to offer the rest of the CASA group, but they need a break, right?

Several participants agreed that there were certain activities that some CASA volunteers were not equipped or prepared to carry out. One of the most frequently cited examples was court report writing. One GAL made the following comment:

GAL's all get screened in part based on their writing ability, based on their communication skills, their communication both orally and in writing. CASA's don't go through that same kind of screening. So the writing piece, I think stymies people.

For some volunteers this may indicate a need for additional training, while for others court report writing may be a skill that they cannot or do not wish to develop or is simply not a prioritized need in a given case. The proposed modifications may help GALs and CASA volunteers navigate this issue by allowing volunteers to tailor their role to suit their preferences and abilities and continue to train to take on more complex tasks as needed.

A second and related consideration in expanding the program was recognition that developing into a well-rounded experienced CASA volunteer can take a great deal of time and understanding of highly complex systems. One of the more recent CASA volunteers expressed feeling overwhelmed by the weight of their role and the potential repercussions of their actions, explaining:

Because it's very intimidating even if you've been given this training, and it's many people's lives that you're becoming involved in and you don't wanna make the wrong choice or do the wrong thing.

GALs echoed the concerns expressed by CASA volunteers who were given so many responsibilities right off the bat. One GAL explained their concern, saying:

It takes any of us doing this years of doing a full caseload to really have a handle on what the laws are, what's required, how you navigate dealing with an OCS worker, all of that stuff. We do it as a profession. We all have backgrounds and education that are applicable to this field. And when you have 100 cases, you see the themes, you see the patterns, all of that, whereas a volunteer doesn't.

GALs also noted that CASA volunteers taking on their first case required significant guidance and that because of their high case-loads, GALs did not always have the capacity to provide the level of individualized supervision and ongoing training needed by newer volunteers. One GAL stated:

And a lot of our new CASAs need a lot of hand-holding. And we just frankly don't have time. And so that – I have never figured out how to kinda manage using them to help support me as opposed to: 'Okay, that's one more obligation on my list of things I gotta do today: make sure my CASA's up to speed on everything.' So I have not done very well with that in my own practice.

The ongoing learning required by newer CASA volunteers may indicate their need to start out with a more individualized service plan and in some cases, fewer responsibilities. One GAL shared their thoughts on this possibility, saying:

I have often felt that there is a layer missing in the CASA program that maybe when new CASAs come on they are doing just a specific piece. Maybe they are going to meet with kids and report back what the needs are and maybe attend case planning meetings. You know, whatever the criteria is that you choose. But that has more structure.

Another part of the equation shared by participants was that it took time for GALs and CASA volunteers to develop trust and confidence in working with each other. As one GAL put it:

I think the missing piece with CASA is the CASA program is so that when a CASA comes in and is assigned, they're unknown. We don't know if that CASA is going to go rogue. We don't know [laughter] – no, I mean honestly. I mean, we don't know and so I think that stops GALs, and not necessarily just our office, but I think all offices, it stops the level of utilization of that person because they are an unknown to you. Just like every other – it's like an unknown person that comes on a case.

CASA volunteers expressed this sentiment as well. One volunteer reflected:

Over time a relationship develops, and they know they can trust you on this part. 'I can trust her judgment on this.' It's a time thing, like all relationships, I think.

As a possible way to address these concerns, several participants recommended creating a graduated level system in which CASA volunteers might start out as a “CASA I,” where the focus was on making connections with the family, assessing for resource needs, and reporting back to the GAL. The model participants proposed would then allow CASA volunteers to obtain additional training and to graduate up to a CASA II or CASA III, where more responsibilities

would be added to their role. For some volunteers, remaining at CASA I would be preferred while others may want more challenging or broader responsibilities, such as court report writing and/or more involvement with the legal process. Participants believed that a level system might reduce early attrition from the program as new volunteers often felt overwhelmed and would also allow an opportunity for GALs and PCs to assess a new volunteer's individual skills and provide or recommend training that would develop other desired knowledge and skills.

GALs liked that this system would give them time to get to know which volunteers they felt comfortable delegating particular and/or additional responsibilities to. One GAL reasoned:

As the guardian ad litem is there and they recognize, oh this person is neutral when they report back. They don't say incendiary things in an e-mail to the attorney, which is going to get everybody all wound up. They know how to phrase what a client might see. When we see what their skill level is, then they come on at another level.

According to CASA and GAL participants, new volunteers might also benefit from mentorship from experienced CASA volunteers, so that perhaps the first step after training would be having them shadow an experienced CASA volunteer to get a feel for the work. One GAL discussed the benefits of CASA mentorship, saying:

And then it's on more of a peer level. Maybe you're more willing to ask the questions that you might not ask us, because they've felt it before.



Targeted Training is Needed

While there was consensus among participants that the pre-service training all CASA volunteers received was useful to orient new volunteers, there was also a commonly shared sentiment that not enough – or enough of the right type – of training existed for CASA volunteers. Some participants felt that the initial training was overly focused on the function of the legal system at the cost of other relational and service matching aspects that in practice comprised the majority of CASA volunteer work. One GAL put it this way:

CASA volunteers can and should have that other knowledge about community mental health program stuff, school stuff, placement, that kind of stuff, but then that's their knowledge. That's their expertise and they report it back to the people who, again, have the experience, and the expertise, and the educational backgrounds to take that information and do something with it in terms of the big picture of legal advocacy as to what are the next steps that need to be in place for this kid.

This also reflects a common sentiment shared by CASA volunteers that while the initial training was beneficial, there was a big leap between the hypothetical nature presented in the training and the real life understanding and experience of the child welfare system. One CASA volunteer summed this feedback up in the following way:

It would've been nice to do more – not hands-on, but day-in-the-life-of-a-CASA kinda training. 'Cause the training is brief. And I think it's kept that way so that people will actually attend it. But looking back I feel like it wasn't enough. It was just kind of: boom, boom, boom, and then you're released into the wild and you have no idea what you're doing.

GAL participants said that they would be more inclined to work with CASA volunteers if they came into a case with a more comprehensive understanding of the systems in which they would be navigating:

I think our biggest concern is time. And doing that up-front training is – I mean, it's hours that we just don't have. But if you had somebody who was a little bit ahead of the game and could come into it and be like, 'Oh, I get what that is,' and, 'Oh yeah, sure, no big deal,' that would save us some time up front and we'd be more prone to do it.

Some GALs suggested that if CASA volunteers had a better understanding from the outset of the demands GALs faced, there would be less frustration on the part of the CASA volunteer when GALs couldn't respond immediately or spend as much time on each case as CASA volunteers could. A GAL summarized this desire:

If I had one case, I would spend 37.5 hours a week on it. So, I think it's hard for them, and I don't criticize them for this. Because until you have that kinda caseload and you're having to bounce and bounce and bounce, it's hard for them to understand. So, I think coming and shadowing us at work for a day outside of a court hearing would be more beneficial.

A number of GALs also suggested that they should be presenters during pre-service training in order to help CASA trainees understand the realities GALs face and what it would be like to work with them individually. They felt this would give trainees a better sense of what to expect and which GALs they might work best with in addition to helping prepare them for their work as CASA volunteers.

In addition to the initial training, CASA volunteers expressed an interest in more hands-on or interactive opportunities. Some expressed a desire to go and tour local agencies that served youth, and others had a specific interest in better understanding the role of the CPS worker assigned to the case.



Photo credit: National CASA/GAL

RECOMMENDATIONS

Alaska CASA exemplifies the power of volunteer advocates to make meaningful, impactful differences in the lives of the children and youth it serves. It has been an honor to meet Alaska CASA Volunteers, GALs, and CASA Program Coordinators and to learn about their work. From our findings, we were able to make the following four recommendations:

- **Alaska CASA should continue providing volunteer services to abused and neglected youth in state custody.**
 - Based on the universal consensus about the value of CASA volunteers, we recommend that Alaska CASA programs focus on sustaining and expanding their programs to provide more child victims of child maltreatment with CASA volunteer services.
- **Alaska CASA should develop a system for graduated levels of volunteer engagement and specialization.**
 - Alaska CASA should increase their reach by allowing volunteers to serve the program in alternative capacities outside of the traditional CASA volunteer role or to specialize/ focus on areas they are skilled or interested in.
 - New CASA volunteers should be assigned fewer responsibilities and should be screened for their ability and desire to assume additional and more challenging roles such as more involvement in the legal process.
- **Pre-service training for volunteers should focus less on the legal process and provide trainees with more practical knowledge about their other roles, such as working with OCS, services for youth, and school advocacy.**
 - CASA volunteers and cases may be better served if CASA volunteer training and practice was more focused on the practical steps needed to assess and advocate for a child's needs. Based on feedback from both CASA and GAL participants, Alaska CASA might consider giving CASA volunteers additional training on frequently navigated systems, such as education and mental health services as well as more experiential training, such as shadowing GALs and more experienced CASA volunteers.
- **Alaska CASA programs should be assessed to determine what financial and other resources will be needed to facilitate program growth and enhancement.**
 - Alaska CASA should assess what staffing and financial resources will be required to achieve their growth objectives and sustain their programs.

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