

LONG-TERM QUALITATIVE EVALUATION REPORT:

CASA YOUTH ADVOCATES, INC. DELAWARE & CHESTER COUNTIES, PA

OCTOBER 2020

HIGHLIGHTS SUMMARY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2018, CASA Youth Advocates, Inc. (CASA) partnered with Capacity for Change, LLC to conduct a long-term qualitative evaluation to explore the experiences and factors that contribute to progress and success for children and youth served by CASA. Key findings and recommendations that emerged during the course of the two-year study include:

- CASA improves the quality of life and experience of children and youth by mobilizing and preparing volunteer advocates to ensure they have a voice to communicate about their needs and desires, and to shape their own futures.
- CASA's effectiveness reflects its consistent commitment to continual improvement and high performance standards for its volunteers and staff.

Success is different for every child. It is not nearly enough to capture the outcome for a child. Rather, the **individual experience of every child is paramount**, including the common benefits of having a CASA: emotional support, having a sense of agency in the process, the presence of a consistent adult. That is the ultimate impact of a CASA in a child's life.

KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

How Effective is CASA?

Overall, CASA is highly effective. Key findings from the long-term evaluation fall into three main areas:

- **The CASA experience:**
 - **Experiential aspect:** CASA is highly effective on the experiential aspect, for children, volunteer advocates, and the staff that facilitate the work. Simply put, CASA improves the quality of life for children and youth by mobilizing and supporting additional help and interventions for them.
 - **CASA staff:** CASA staff excel in facilitation skills, commitment to their work, compassion for all involved, deferring to volunteer advocates, and providing the up-front (training) and ongoing support that volunteer advocates need.

- **Quality of life:** The impact and emphasis on quality of life for children and youth is as important, arguably more important, than metrics such as length of time in care or re-adjudication rates.
 - **Relationships:** The impact of the relationships established between volunteer advocates and children are often life-changing, immediately and over the long-term. Strong and constructive relationships are at the core of all progress.
 - **Volunteers and supervisors:** The factors that contribute successful partnerships between volunteer advocates and their supervisors: open and honest communication, accessibility, overall feeling of support from the organization and peer advocates.
 - **Volunteer retention:** Volunteer retention rates appear to be influenced most by two factors: burn-out and factors in their personal lives; burn-out stems from the inherent stress involved in the cases and from frustration with the systems of care, excluding CASA – CASA is very good at preventing burn-out and if not for its attention on supporting volunteer advocates, the retention rate of volunteers would undoubtedly be far lower.
 - **Goals versus reality:** The stated goals of the system versus what happens in reality are sometimes at odds; e.g., a return home is not the best solution for all, and CASA plays the important role of finding the individual best solution for each individual, and ensuring that the individual – the child or youth – has a voice in defining the solution.
- **CASA oversight and operations:**
 - **Volunteers:** Volunteers perform at a high level thanks to the screening, training, and ongoing supervision and support provided by CASA.
 - **High standards:** CASA is effective with reinforcing practices and behaviors among volunteer advocates that produce the most positive experiences and outcomes, and the organizational support provided to case supervisors positively impacts the support provided to volunteer advocates.
 - **Learning and adaptation:** CASA's willingness to probe, to solicit honest feedback from internal and external stakeholders, and to adjust all contribute to its effectiveness and to its strong reputation in the community as a valued partner.
 - **DEI:** CASA is increasingly placing a diversity, equity, and inclusion and anti-racism lens at the center of its work, and has made an organizational commitment to do so, and monitoring its progress and lessons learned in this area is as important as any other aspect of its work.

Evaluation Activities

Observations of key activities:

- Volunteer advocate trainings and meetings
- Court appearances
- Staff case meeting

Interviews:

- Former 'CASA youth' – those with experience of being paired with a volunteer advocate
- Volunteer advocates
- Partners and colleagues from other organizations and government agencies
- Staff

Surveys:

- Staff
- Volunteer advocates
- Partners

Other:

- Case studies
- Document and data review
- Field research
- Alignment of the findings from the RISE Partnership, an evaluation capacity building initiative

Staff and Volunteer Advocate Interviews

This section presents high-level themes that surfaced from interviews of six CASA staff members and 12 volunteers in late 2018.

Side-by-side Reflections from Staff and Volunteers

Common Circumstances or Factors that Contribute to Success

Staff	Volunteers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Committed and dedicated volunteers - Support for volunteers: Understanding what volunteers need and being accessible to them - Committed and dedicated staff - Combination of relationships between staff, supervisors and volunteers, volunteers with each other, volunteer and the child 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - CASA staff/supervisor: Coaching, support, encouragement; especially important to have a strong working relationship and connection - Initial and ongoing training - Interaction with other advocates - CYS caseworkers (not necessarily in a positive way)

Common Obstacles to Success

Staff	Volunteers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unfair system: CYS, child welfare, courts - Time constraints and management - Balancing reporting requirements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - CYS: Perception that some are not doing what is in the best interest of the child; slow pace; sloppy work; capacity is overstretched

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Caseload size - System in general - Lack of resources for kids 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Court system: Slow pace - Communications issues: Turnover with CYS staff, lack of responsiveness from foster parents - Rotating variables: Caseworker, parent, child (namely, teenagers), foster homes – every case is different - “The System”: CYS, courts, supports available, intergenerational poverty
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Partner and Colleague Interviews

This section presents high-level themes that surfaced from interviews of 23 external stakeholders of CASA conducted during the first quarter of 2019. Interviewees reflected a range of perspectives, including but not limited to judges, legal advocates, and supervisors and staff of government agencies in Delaware and Chester Counties.

CASA Strengths

- Most helpful in complicated cases
- Comprehensive, high quality reports (“the gold standard”)
- Ability to get and search records
- Role in making educational and medical decisions
- Increases the ability to get a snapshot of what is happening, the history and timeline
- Thinking outside of the box – finding ways to make things work
- Often the most consistent person in a child’s life
- Ability to let everyone bring their own strength and expertise to the table

When CASA Works

- Collaborative approach is established
- Open and direct communication is flowing
- Older children tend to need a CASA more; they want more of a say and CASAs helps make it happen
- CASA is open to feedback and understands the system; they serve in a complementary role and do not try to do case management
- Adult support is present for a child, which CASA is effective at gauging
- Environmental/individual factors are in place or addressed: stable housing, education, parenting skills and stability, finances, undiagnosed learning disabilities, lack of responsiveness to race and ethnicity in the system

Former Youth and Caregiver Interviews

This section presents themes from interviews completed with youth and caregivers who were involved with CASA. Interviews were conducted in early 2019 with three former youth and in spring 2020 with two former youth and two caregivers.

Common Circumstances or Factors that Contribute to Having the Most Likelihood of Success for Children and Youth

- Having a voice and being listened to
- Being mentored by someone, namely a CASA volunteer advocate
- The fact that CASAs are volunteers and do not have the limitations placed on them by government agency supervisors
- Consistency that a CASA provides
- Getting assistance to access resources and therapy (and CASAs often play this role)
- Having someone outside of the system advocating for a child
- Stable housing

Obstacles to Success and/or Breakdowns in the System

- Children and youth are often not listened to (which makes CASAs necessary)
- For those with siblings who are living separately, visitations are not frequent enough
- Lack of collaboration across agencies and organizations
- Turnover among caseworkers and lack of consistency of attention and responsiveness levels among caseworkers

Case Studies

Capacity for Change tracked four cases during the course of a year from fall 2019 – summer 2020. Information was gathered through interviews of CASA volunteer advocates and CASA case supervisors, and in three cases, through observations of court hearings.

Notable Findings from Case Studies:

- **Every case is distinct:** The case studies, side-by-side, illustrate, once again, the distinct nature of every case, and why every case demands a tailored approach with careful attention to detail, from the matching of an advocate with a case to the need for continual assessments and tracking. No two cases are alike, and the cases are dynamic, requiring ever-adaptive case support and advocacy.
- **Unclear outcomes:** The possible outcomes for the cases vary, and the ‘best’ outcome is typically not known at the outset or even very far into the case management. This is due to shifting variables, changing contexts, and the evolving understanding of what is best for a child. Few CASA cases are clear or linear from start to finish, and setting this

expectation at the start is important to keep advocates engaged and to encourage persistence in the pursuit of what is best for the child – it may not be known at the outset or far into the case, but it will become known.

- **Advocates:** The advocates' perspective of their role vary as much as the cases and the advocates themselves, and the common run-through is the focus on what is best for the child and making sure they have a voice, and ensuring the advocate has the needed support from CASA. All of the advocates expressed admiration and high satisfaction with CASA.

Areas for Further Inquiry

CASA consistently demonstrates its commitment to engage in continual inquiry and learning. A few areas that emerged with potential for deepening and widening insights through further inquiry include:

- Disparities in opportunities and care rooted in race and ethnicity, and examining the dynamics in communities, systems, and CASA itself
- The impact, real and potential, for improving experiences and outcomes for children and youth by working to address the gaps and weaknesses in systems, particularly in Delaware County where CASA established the Voices for Children coalition
- The contrast of the experience between Chester and Delaware Counties on the experiences of children, youth, and advocates
- Progress with getting established in Chester County, and the state of partnerships, lessons learned, and areas for continued improvement in the county
- Ways to communicate about the impact of CASA on the quality of life of children and youth
- Complementing and contrasting qualitative evaluation methods with the burgeoning efforts to capture quantitative data
- Impacts of COVID-19 on children and youth, and on what long-term impacts it will have on the future delivery of services and programs