

Anne Arundel County CASA, Inc.
Policies and Procedures for CASA Volunteers

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1. VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT

The CASA program is committed to providing appropriate and effective advocacy services for children while maintaining child safety and program integrity. Our goal is to:

A. To *maximize the safety of the children served* by assigning only volunteers who, to the best of our ability to determine, have no recorded history of crimes against or involving children, or crime which threaten the safety or well-being of children, and possess the emotional stability and appropriate motivations necessary for involvement in the program;

B. To *maximize the effectiveness of the advocacy services provided* by assigning only volunteers who, throughout the course of the screening and training process, demonstrate, to the best of our ability to determine, that they have the time, ability and willingness to effectively, objectively and appropriately advocate on behalf of the best interests of a child, and;

C. To *minimize the risk of liability to the program* so as to ensure its integrity and the continuation of services to children by Anne Arundel County CASA, Inc.

CASA volunteers are ordinary citizens from throughout the county. They are actively recruited from all racial and ethnic groups and varying socio-economic levels that include men and women of all ages to achieve a diverse volunteer pool. Volunteers are sought who have a strong commitment to children and a desire to work within the legal system and in accordance with the rules and regulations of CASA. Key characteristics that must be present in a CASA are objectivity, competence, sensitivity and commitment.

2. VOLUNTEER SCREENING AND TRAINING

CASA employs an extensive, multi-step evaluative process that each prospective volunteer must successfully complete prior to acceptance into the program:

A. Application. Potential volunteers submit an application, which provides identifying, personal and professional information. Each applicant is required to supply the names and addresses of three references, including one professional and one non-friend. Applications may be sent in via postal mail or electronically. Upon receipt of the application, reference inquiries are sent out and the applicant is contacted. A preliminary telephone interview is conducted to assess the candidate's knowledge and understanding of the nature of this commitment. If both parties agree that this is an appropriate volunteer experience, than an initial face-to- face interview is scheduled.

B. Initial Interview. The applicant participates in a structured interview with a staff member in order to assess their viability as a candidate. Detailed information about the program, and the roles and responsibilities of the CASA are also provided. Once the interview is completed, the applicant's information is discussed among the case supervisors, and offers to attend the training are extended to appropriate candidates. If an individual is determined to not be a good fit for the program, that person is contacted by the training coordinator and alternate volunteer opportunities are discussed.

C. Training. Applicants participate in a comprehensive training program that includes thirty-five (35) hours classroom instruction, role playing, independent study, homework and court observation. The Curriculum is based on National CASA materials, which is implemented by specially trained program staff. Topics include an explanation of CASA history, roles and responsibilities and assignment process, cultural awareness and competence, child welfare and protective services systems, issues of abuse and neglect, permanency planning for children in care, advocacy skills, juvenile court process and court report writing, understanding families and children, communication and information gathering skills. Screening continues throughout the training experience. If, at any point during the training program, either the applicant or staff develop concerns, a meeting will be conducted so as to assess whether or not this program is a good fit for the applicant.

D. Background Review. Applicants are screened for past incidence of child abuse or neglect as well as any other criminal behavior, through the State of Maryland, the FBI, the National Sex Offender Database and the Maryland Department of Social Services Registry. Applicants who have lived in Maryland less than five years will also have their information submitted to the child abuse registry in the state in which they previously resided.

Fingerprint identification must demonstrate the applicant has not been convicted nor is currently charged for the commission or attempt to commit: murder, child abuse, rape, child pornography, child abduction, kidnapping of a child, or a sexual offense as defined under Article 27, Annotated Code of Maryland, Sections 464, 464A, 464B and 464C, or any equivalent offense. Applicants must also pass a driving record check conducted by the Motor Vehicle Administration.

Education and employment history may also be verified. Any discrepancies or abnormalities revealed in the background review will be staffed by the training coordinator and the Executive Director, to assess any potential impact on the status of the candidate's application.

E. Final Interview. After successfully completing pre-service training and background reviews, CASA volunteers participate in a closing interview conducted by CASA staff. At that time, aspects of the training program will be reviewed for understanding. Additionally, the applicant's appropriateness for and commitment to the CASA role is reassessed. Upon acceptance, applicants are sworn in by a Circuit Court judge at a *Swearing-In Ceremony* followed by a brief reception. Family and friends are welcomed as well as various local attorneys, Masters, current CASA's, board members, staff & community guests.

F. Maintenance of Volunteer Records. All documentation pertaining to the volunteers application, references, interviews, background investigations and training are placed in a volunteers file. That file will also contain any subsequent correspondence, as well as the volunteer's annual performance review. Examination of this file by the volunteer may occur upon written request to the Executive Director. Volunteers may submit additional information to the file in writing to the Executive Director.

3. CASE ASSIGNMENT

The CASA program works as a team with staff members of Legal Aid, DSS and the Courts, in order to identify appropriate referrals to facilitate the utilization of CASA volunteers. Any legal party to the proceedings may request a CASA assignment through the Judge or Master. The CASA program accepts “Orders Appointing Child Advocate” from the Circuit Court on behalf of children who are the subject of Child In Need of Assistance (CINA) petitions. At the discretion of the staff, volunteers are matched with individual children, based on their similar backgrounds, sensitivity to the needs of the child and the special skills, abilities and interests of the CASA volunteer. Volunteers will be notified as soon as an appropriate case becomes available.

Volunteers must commit to a minimum service term of one year or one case that might extend beyond one year. The volunteer may not be related to any parties involved in the case, employed in any position that might result in a conflict of interest with Anne Arundel County CASA, Inc., nor have direct or indirect financial interest in the program. Notices of Assignment are sent to the Court and related parties once a CASA volunteer has received her/his case assignment.

4. CONFIDENTIALITY

Upon the volunteer’s appointment to a child’s case, a Court order will be issued, which will permit the volunteer to access confidential information about the assigned child. Specifically, the Court order permits CASAs to review and obtain copies of the child's Court file, educational and medical records, social summary psychiatric/psychological evaluations or other records that are deemed necessary or relevant to the child's case.

All CASA volunteers, as well as candidates in training, must agree and take an oath that they, “shall maintain any information received from any source about a child/family as confidential and will not disclose the same, except in reports to the Court and to parties in the child's case.” Very simply, all case information is to be kept strictly confidential. It may be shared only with the Court, the Anne Arundel County CASA staff, and the parties involved in the child’s case. (For example, teachers and therapists are not legal parties in CINA proceedings). If uncertainty exists about who “the parties” include, ask the Anne Arundel County CASA staff before imparting any information.

The role of the CASA volunteer is to gather information for the Court, not to give information. It is the Department of Social Services’ staff who may decide what information may be disclosed to other persons involved with child abuse and neglect cases, not a CASA’s. Information such as the location of foster homes, the initial reporting source, and similar details of a child’s case should never be disclosed by the CASA.

A CASA volunteer may not involve their family members, friends, co-workers or neighbors in their experiences as a CASA volunteer. Only Anne Arundel County CASA staff and volunteers may be utilized for support and guidance in one's volunteer experience. Maintaining this policy protects the child and his/her family, the CASA volunteer, and all CASA programs across the country.

SOCIAL COMPUTING (ADHERE TO CONFIDENTIALITY POLICY)

While social computing supports an open dialogue and exchange of ideas, it is important to exhibit caution when discussing your role as a CASA due to the extremely confidential nature of the information to which you have access. Social computing can be defined as blogging, Wiki, and participation in the many forms of social media including Twitter, Facebook and MySpace, as well as video and picture sharing sites. In that individuals are legally responsible for anything they post online, please follow these guidelines when deciding what to present or discuss:

1. **Identify yourself.** Be clear about who you are and identify your role as a CASA volunteer in general terms.
2. **Post a disclaimer.** Make it clear that what you say is representative of your views and opinions and not necessarily the views and opinions of Anne Arundel County CASA, Inc.
3. **Protect confidentiality.** Do not discuss any information pertaining to your current or former case(s) that have been obtained through your role as CASA or would allow someone to identify the child(ren), family, or other persons related to the case. Do not post pictures or video.
4. **Use good judgment.** If you are unsure if a narrative is appropriate, do not post it. Contact the Executive Director for further clarification.

MEDIA ACCESS (ADHERE TO CONFIDENTIALITY POLICY)

Any media requests for information should be directed to the Executive Director, who will ensure that information originating from Anne Arundel County CASA is accurate, complete, and reflects the official position of the agency.

Requests for interviews

All interviews of Anne Arundel County CASA staff and volunteers by any form of media, whether by phone, email or in person require advance authorization from the Executive Director. Information disclosed during an interview is limited to discussion about the general role of a CASA volunteer. Information specific to a case can not be disclosed without the written consent of the child's legal guardian, which is normally the parent or the Department of Social Services (DSS).

Letters to the editor

Letters to the editor may be submitted by volunteers as a concerned citizen voicing an individual viewpoint. Any letters where the media might assume that the individual is reflecting the views of the organization is prohibited unless approved in advance by the Executive Director.

5. CASE SUPERVISION

The Case Supervisor and CASA volunteer will meet at a minimum of every four to six weeks for case consultation to include discussion of case progress, planning, and support. The Case Supervisor is also available by phone and email should the CASA volunteer require information or need to report emergencies or circumstances related to the child and other parties. Given the

complexity of the child welfare and court systems and issues facing children and families, supervisory contacts are often a means of providing additional individual training to the CASA. Documentation of these contacts will be maintained in the child's file by the Case Supervisor.

6. ABUSE REPORTING

If a volunteer suspects that a child has experienced additional abuse or neglect, please follow the following procedure:

- A. Call the Case Supervisor to discuss the incident of suspected abuse or neglect.
- B. Call the 24 hour Child Protective Service (CPS) abuse and neglect reporting hotline in the county in which the incident occurred, **even if unable to reach your supervisor.**
- C. The person taking the call will ask for an address to which to send a confirmation letter. Provide them with the CASA office address:

**CASA
94 Franklin Street
Annapolis, MD 21401**

- D. As a courtesy, call the DSS Caseworker assigned to the child's case to make them aware of the incident and that a CPS call was placed.
- E. Write up a brief description of the incident along with the date and time that the CPS report was called in and forward to your Case Supervisor.

Remember that it is not the volunteer's responsibility to assess the validity of the complaint, only to report it. It is the responsibility of DSS to make that determination!

7. COURT REPORT WRITING

Writing a court report is a process, sometimes requiring several drafts. The Case Supervisor will inform the CASA of the due date of the first draft of the report – usually three to four weeks before the hearing date. The Case Supervisor will review the draft reports written by the CASA, and will make suggestions, ask questions, and raise concerns that might require additional investigation by the CASA. An attempt is made to maintain the uniqueness of each CASA's report within a systematic report framework. Judges and Masters in Chancery expect in the report documentation of the CASA volunteer's contacts with the child, other parties and significant others; objective, factual background information; and recommendations that emanate from reported information. Case Supervisors will not alter information or recommendations included in court reports without the knowledge of and consultation/agreement with the CASA volunteer. Court reports will be distributed to all parties by the Case Supervisor seven days prior to the hearing.

8. WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

On-going communication with case related parties and team members is one of the primary methods the CASA volunteer uses in gathering information and in providing child advocacy. While it is not the role of the CASA volunteer to give out information, it can be helpful at times to communicate with parties and team members through memos or letters.

The CASA's Case Supervisor shall first review any such form of correspondence from a CASA volunteer to any party or team member. All such written correspondence will be placed on CASA letterhead and appropriately disseminated to all required parties and others as necessary.

Birthday cards to children are exempted from this policy, as is email correspondence. Any questions regarding other correspondence to children should be directed to the CASA Case Supervisor.

Maintaining this policy protects the CASA volunteer, as well as the CASA program, and ensures consistency in the provision of service.

9. ANNUAL VOLUNTEER FEEDBACK

Case supervisors will meet annually with the volunteer to provide feedback pertaining to the CASA's strengths and weaknesses related to their performance of the CASA role. Feedback will also be solicited from the volunteer regarding program improvements.

10. CONFLICTS

Should any conflicts occur between the Case Supervisor and CASA volunteer regarding the handling of a case or the content of a report, including recommendations made in the report, every attempt should be made by the supervisor and volunteer to resolve the disagreement through respectful discussion and active listening.

If the issue has not been resolved, the CASA and Case Supervisor should together develop a plan of action that might include,

- ◇ further gathering of case information by the CASA,
- ◇ review of pertinent reference material, including but not limited to the program's mission, policies, procedures, CASA job description and other applicable topics covered in volunteer training.

If an issue still remains between the supervisor and volunteer, a team meeting will be held within one week. Participants will include the CASA volunteer, Case Supervisor, and Executive Director. A consensus decision is the preferred outcome.

11. RECORDS MANAGEMENT

Volunteers shall maintain complete records about a case, including contact information, Court documents, interviews, meeting notes, assessments, evaluations, correspondence and any additional information that may be gathered about the child.

This record remains the property of Anne Arundel County CASA, Inc. and must be returned to the Case Supervisor within 14 days of the volunteer's termination from the case. Records are maintained by the agency for seven years and until the child turns 21 years old.

12. CASE CLOSURE

The program closes a case when the CINA order is terminated by the court. The program may request that the Court rescind the CASA order, if the volunteer and staff believe that the child is in a safe, stable permanent home.

In some instances, a volunteer is unable to fulfill their obligation to the child. Such cases will be re-assigned to another volunteer.

Upon closure of the case:

- ◇ The volunteer will participate in a final meeting with their supervisor to discuss the volunteer's impressions of the case and discuss any necessary next steps.
- ◇ The volunteer will provide a case summary detailing any information pertinent to the case that is not currently located in the record.
- ◇ The volunteer will meet one last time with their CASA child in order to provide closure.
- ◇ All written documentation will be returned to the Case Supervisor.
- ◇ All electronic files are to be deleted from personal computers and the recycle bin is to be emptied.

13. CONTINUING EDUCATION

Volunteers are expected to participate in twelve hours of continuing education on a yearly basis, the year running from July 1 to June 30. CASA offers two hours of training per month, in which volunteers are encouraged to participate in order to meet this requirement. Participation in outside seminars and conferences also count. Volunteers can discuss with their supervisor additional ways to meet this requirement, if volunteers are out of compliance.

14. TRANSPORTATION

The Anne Arundel County CASA, Inc. Board of Directors recognizes that the potential for personal liability of Anne Arundel County CASA volunteers should be reduced to a minimum,

and that no volunteer is required to provide transportation as a part of his or her volunteer activities, but rather try to meet the child's needs by advocating for the necessary transportation with the appropriate involved agencies.

Therefore, no Anne Arundel County CASA volunteer is required to provide transportation as a part of his or her volunteer activities. Further, Anne Arundel County CASA volunteers should explore all viable alternatives (such as family members, neighbors, bus tokens or cab fare) prior to agreeing to provide transportation.

Anne Arundel County CASA volunteers who are contemplating providing transportation to a client are urged to *first check with their insurance carrier* to ensure that such activity will be covered under their existing policy of automobile insurance.

If the volunteer decides to provide transportation to a client with his or her role as an advocate for that child, the Anne Arundel County CASA volunteer may do so, provided the volunteer *first*:

- ◇ Has the permission of the juvenile's primary caregiver and one legal guardian (DSS caseworker).
- ◇ Signs CASA's statement of commitment where indicated, acknowledging that the volunteer has no immunity from claims while transporting a client and that the volunteer has received a copy of this policy.
- ◇ Provides Anne Arundel County CASA, Inc. with a copy of his or her current declaration page from the volunteer's insurance policy, a certificate of insurance, or other form of evidence satisfactory to Anne Arundel County CASA, Inc. that the volunteer has automobile insurance in effect.
- ◇ Provides Anne Arundel County CASA with a copy of his or her valid driver's license and a signed consent for CASA to obtain the volunteer's driving record.
- ◇ Notifies the volunteer's Case Supervisor at CASA about his or her decision to transport a juvenile client.
- ◇ Ensures compliance with Maryland child passenger safety laws.

15. PERSONAL REFERENCES

Personal references, either verbal or written, will be provided within five business days, upon receipt of a written request by the volunteer. The reference will include the dates of the volunteer's service and a description of the volunteer's responsibilities.

In the event the volunteer transfers to another CASA program, information will be provided to the other program once the volunteer provides this agency with a written consent to release information. Information released will include, the content of the training, swearing in date, a description of the volunteer's responsibilities, and the number and duration of cases assigned to the volunteer.

16. VOLUNTEER TERMINATION

A CASA volunteer shall not become inappropriately involved in a CASA assignment in a manner that could lead to a conflict of interest and/or liability problems. A CASA volunteer shall not be related to any parties involved in the case, be employed in a position or an agency that might result in a conflict of interest, nor have direct or indirect financial interest in the program. Any potential conflicts of interest situations should be immediately brought to the attention of the Executive Director for consideration.

The CASA volunteer serves at the discretion of the Executive Director. Examples of inappropriate volunteer practices that could affect the tenure of the volunteer include, but are not limited to, the following:

- A. Taking a child to the volunteer's home.
- B. Communicating with a CASA child in the presence of the volunteer's family members, friends, and acquaintances.
- C. Discussing a child's case with **anyone** besides approved parties, CASA staff, or other CASA volunteers.
- D. Initiating an ex-parte communication about the child's case with the court.
- E. Giving legal advice or therapeutic counseling.
- F. Giving money or expensive gifts to the child or family.
- G. Making placement arrangements for a child without permission and approval from the court or the Department of Social Services.
- H. Taking action without CASA program, Department of Social Services or court approval that endangers the child or is outside the role of the program.
- I. Violating a program policy, court rule, or law.
- J. Failing to demonstrate an ability to effectively carry out assigned duties and responsibilities.
- K. Taking a child from a home/shelter or off an authorized premise without the permission of the parent/family/caretaker, foster parent, group home or residential facility administrator.
- L. Failing to report the child's whereabouts to the proper authorities in case of an emergency.

- M. Failing to report allegations of child abuse or neglect concerning the CASA child to the Case Supervisor and to the Department of Social Services or the police.
- N. Transporting a CASA child in an uninsured vehicle; or in a manner that is not in compliance with Maryland child passenger restraint laws.
- O. Failing at anytime to notify Anne Arundel County CASA, Inc. of any Motor Vehicle Administration speeding or DWI traffic violations.
- P. Failing to notify Anne Arundel County CASA, Inc. of any convictions, pending or threatened charges against the volunteer, regarding any criminal offense, including but not limited to: manufacturing, distributing, or dispensing a controlled dangerous substance; the possession with intent to manufacture, distribute or dispense a controlled dangerous substance; child abuse; child neglect; murder; rape; child pornography; child abduction; kidnapping; any sexual offense; or any charge that poses a threat to the safety and/or well-being of a child, indicates poor judgment and/or threatens the program's credibility.
- Q. Willfully providing false or misleading information on the application or during the screening process.

17. RETURNING VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers who have not held a case in the last 24 months will be required to submit to a complete background screening. In addition, returning volunteers will re-sign a “statement of commitment.”