

CHAPTER 1

THE CASA PROGRAM IN NEW YORK STATE

WHAT IS CASA?

CASA: ca-sa [kah'-suh] noun: acronym for Court Appointed Special Advocates; or Court Appointed Special Assistants. To use the name trademark name "CASA," a program must be in good standing with the National CASA Association (*see Chapter 2 for Quality Assurance Standards*), a network of almost 1000 programs across the United States. In some states, the program may be known as GAL or Guardian Ad Litem programs.

CASA is a volunteer based program of advocates for abused, neglected or at-risk children in Family Court proceedings.

In 1977, a Seattle, Washington Superior Court Judge named David Soukup was concerned about trying to make decisions on behalf of abused and neglected children without enough information. He conceived the idea of appointing community volunteers to speak up for the best interests of these children in court. He made a request for volunteers; 50 citizens responded, and that was the start of the CASA movement. Judges across the United States began to replicate the program, and in 1990, the United States Congress encouraged the expansion of CASA programs with passage of the Victims of Child Abuse Act.

Today, we have grown to a network of more than 58,000 volunteers across the country. Since CASA's inception, we have served well over 1,000,000 children find safe, permanent homes in which they can thrive.

CASA volunteers are empowered to make a lifelong difference in the lives of abused and neglected children. A 2006 audit of the National CASA Association, conducted by the US Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General, demonstrates that children with a CASA volunteer involved:

- ♥ are substantially less likely to spend more than 3 years in foster care: 13.3% for CASA cases versus 27.0% of all children in foster care.
- ♥ are more likely to be "permanently closed" (i.e., the children are less likely to reenter the child welfare system) than cases where a CASA volunteer is not involved. 91% of CASA children do not reenter the system.
- ♥ both children and their parents received more services.

CASA volunteers can help turn a child's life of hurt into one of hope.

WHAT IS THE INTENT OF THIS MANUAL?

The continued best practice and expansion of effective, high-quality volunteer advocacy for abused and neglected children is the goal of every CASA program. This manual is designed to help you, as a program director, accomplish those goals. These pages will provide you with a wealth of program regulations, guidelines and ideas, which will be regularly updated. Great ideas continually evolve within the CASA network, and we will include new ideas, procedures and best practice in future updates.

A collaborative effort of the New York State Unified Court System, Office of Court Administration, Division of Court Operations Office of Alternative Dispute Resolution and Court Improvement Programs CASA Assistance Program (UCS) *and* CASA: Advocates for Children of New York State (CASANYS), the non-profit statewide association, this manual is designed to guide you through a range of program management issues. Those include quality assurance standards, Court Rules, contract management, volunteer recruiting, supervision and retention, data management and communications. Some topics will be fully addressed here; other issues will serve as reference points to direct you to additional resources for your work. You will find annotated links to web resources and references to other program management guides. Staff of UCS and CASANYS is available and look forward to helping you with further information and support. For the purposes of this manual, “we” refers to the New York State CASA network support system, including both CASANYS and UCS.

This entire manual may be found at www.casanys.orgxxxx and www.nycourts.gov/ip/casa/xxx. There you will also find updates as posted, which you will be notified to download and add to the hardcopy binder which has been provided to you.

We hope you will tell us what you find most useful and share any new approaches you would like to see included in future updates. Together, we can ensure the continued expansion of effective volunteers speaking up for abused and neglected children in the courts. And that will mean more children finding the safe, permanent home each of them deserves. In the work of speaking up for our most vulnerable children, we must settle for no less than excellence. In an effort to encourage and support best practice, this guide is intended to assist you in the excellent work you do.

WHAT IS A CASA VOLUNTEER?

CASA volunteers are trained community volunteers who are appointed by Family Court judges to advocate for the best interests of children in cases involving abuse and neglect. CASA volunteers bring critical information about children's health, safety and well being to the Court's attention. Recruited from the community, CASA volunteers are interviewed, screened, receive at least thirty hours of standardized training and take an oath to uphold the best interests of the children and to observe confidentiality prior to case assignment. Under the supervision of CASA program staff, the volunteers gather information about the case, meet with the child and prepare formal written reports to the Court. They work closely with Law Guardians, social service departments and other service providers to ensure that the case reaches a timely conclusion and that the child's safety and permanency are ensured. A major strength of the CASA program is its provision of individualized advocacy to each child and family in some of the most problematic cases before the Family Court.

The process of CASA case advocacy begins in the community with the recruitment of volunteers. Representatives of the CASA program educate the public about child abuse and the needs of children in foster care, raising awareness of the challenges faced by the systems designed to ensure their safety. Through presentations, publicity, special events, employers, and word of mouth, potential volunteers are identified and then interviewed by the program director to determine their appropriateness for the volunteer role.

CASA volunteers come from varied backgrounds and walks of life. They are ordinary people who care about children. No particular experience or education is required. CASA volunteers are committed, responsible, mature adults with a high degree of professionalism. Requirements include a commitment to children and the availability to offer an average of about ten to fifteen hours of service per month, often during business hours. We also ask that volunteers commit to one year of service, in order to monitor a case until it is closed. The average case lasts about a year and a half. CASA volunteers are closely supervised and supported throughout their casework.

Candidates are screened for criminal convictions and allegations of child abuse; and must then undergo an intensive structured initial training. The curriculum is a minimum of thirty classroom hours and covers such topics as the roles and responsibilities of a CASA volunteer, Family Court and social service procedures, cultural awareness, dynamics of abuse and neglect within the family, substance abuse, domestic violence, mental health, permanency planning, interviewing and writing skills, advocacy skills and self-care. This training, the National CASA Association Volunteer Training Curriculum, may be found at www.casenet.org (see Chapter Three, *Program Management*) in the *Private Program* section under *The Training Corner*. In addition, the Facilitator Manual and supplemental materials may be found there.

Volunteers also annually attend at least twelve hours of regular in-service trainings. Topics of ongoing training may include working with law guardians; case law; special needs of abused children; mental health; domestic violence; substance abuse; educational needs; healthy development of children in foster care; the Adoption and Safe Families Act; and Permanency Legislation. In addition, the National CASA Association provides an annual conference open to

all staff and volunteers and CASANYS and UCS offer statewide trainings on selected topics as well as ongoing technical assistance to local programs, routinely disseminating information for use by volunteers. Ongoing training ensures the standard of excellence in professionalism and collaboration with the court that has come to be expected of a CASA program.

Once the volunteer has completed the training, he/she is sworn in by the presiding Family Court judge, takes an oath of confidentiality and may begin taking cases. The CASA volunteer's work on each case is closely monitored by the program director or volunteer supervisor.

When a local CASA program is first assigned a case by order of a Family Court judge, the program director reviews the court order and then assigns an appropriate, trained volunteer to the case. The CASA volunteer reads the court files and other relevant records and obtains necessary releases. The CASA volunteer gathers information from all relevant individuals in the case: the caseworker and other service providers including mental health and addictions treatment providers, school personnel, health care personnel, parents, other involved relatives, foster parents when the child is already in care, and any other parties who might have significant information on a child's circumstance. The CASA volunteer confers with all legal services providers: the parents' attorneys, DSS attorney, and Law Guardian. The CASA volunteer also visits and talks with the child at least once per month where possible and appropriate.

This initial review of the case is then discussed with the CASA program director or volunteer supervisor. A proposed time schedule for ongoing research into the case is established. Any new information obtained through interviews or the review of documents that is not known to the case worker or law guardian is shared with those individuals. This ensures that all parties are on the same page as the case progresses. Depending on the individual case circumstances, the CASA volunteer will then make daily, weekly, biweekly or monthly inquiries into case progress. They monitor compliance with court orders, exploring, for example, whether a parent has been attending substance abuse counseling or a child has received necessary developmental, educational, health and mental health evaluations and/or services.

Prior to any court appearance, the CASA volunteer submits a written report summarizing all of his or her research. The reports provide information that assists the court in making well-informed and timely decisions in the children's best interests. Based on the *Memorandum of Understanding* with the local Family Court (see Chapter Two, *Guiding Documents*, on Quality Assurance Standards), that report may list concerns or recommendations; or may simply report the facts. The CASA program director or volunteer coordinator reviews and edits the report and then submits it to the court. The procedure for report distribution varies by county, but generally involves either CASA distributing the report to all parties, or the court's making those copies available. Because the CASA report contains up-to-date information from all parties involved, the report is often used by judge and the attorneys to come to agreement about how to achieve permanency and ensure safety in the shortest possible time frame. The CASA volunteer continues on the case until a safe, permanent home is secured. They monitor the court order to ensure that all mandated services are accessible and provided and that the child's safety is maintained.

The CASA volunteer and/or program staff attends all court appearances and permanency meetings, and continues to monitor all court orders and report to the court as the case progresses. CASA volunteers in New York State function as “friends of the court;” that is, they are not parties to the case and cannot initiate new action if a court order is violated. They may, however, raise concerns with the caseworker, Law Guardian and/or other parties so that the case may be returned to the court calendar if necessary.

CASA volunteers help to ensure that the child welfare system works to its highest potential to secure the safe, loving, permanent home that CASA believes is every child’s birthright. They remain involved until resolution of the case, sometimes up to three or more years, until there is a final determination by the Court of a safe, permanent home for the child. CASA is successful due in large part to the commitment of the individual volunteers and their high level of training and supervision. Independent statewide surveys conducted in 1998 and 2002 by Quantum Dynamics, a research and consulting firm, found CASA to be very well respected overall, especially by judges. CASA volunteers are considered highly effective as information resources for judges and as service brokers linking services and caregivers with families and children; are thought to deliver high quality services in such areas as written reports and courtroom testimony; are believed to be well trained; and are noted for their ability to interact well with others. The most recent study indicated that, among counties in New York State that have CASA programs, Family Court judges rated their overall impression of CASA at 4.69 on a scale of one to five, with five being “very favorable” (Quantum Dynamics, 1998, 2002).

The CASA volunteer’s primary focus is to speak up for the child: to assure that his or her best interests are not overlooked and that the child is placed in a safe, nurturing permanent home as quickly as possible.

How, you say, can our volunteers do all that? With excellent guidance and support from the program staff, that’s how. Read on to learn how program staff is supported by the entire CASA network and how this guide will help you.

WHAT IS THE HISTORY OF OUR STATEWIDE NETWORK?

New York State's CASA programs range from those in rural farming communities to the first in the state formed in New York City; to those currently in development; those operating as stand-alone non-profits; and those housed in various types of umbrella or administering agencies. Diversity and flexibility are essential in encouraging this expansion and adaptation of the CASA model. The staff and volunteers from all these programs are united in their commitment to doing their best for the children. This diversity also presents challenges.

The CASA program began in NYS in 1979 as grassroots efforts in New York City and Monroe County. The programs were established to meet the needs of the courts in those areas through the efforts of the Brooklyn Junior League and Junior League of Rochester, the Council of New York Law Associates, the Council on Adoptable Children, and Rochester Action for Foster Children. As the success of the program spread, other counties were added over the years.

Programs developed to meet the needs of their local court system. Some oversee CASA program operations in one county, and several programs are multi-county sites. To use the CASA program name, one must be a member in good standing of the National CASA Association, whose standards require being a member of the state CASA Association and complying with Court Rules. (See Chapter Two, *Guiding Documents*.)

Several programs in the state are part of larger umbrella or administering agencies that provide administrative and programmatic support to CASA. Examples of those agencies include Alternative Dispute Resolution or mediation programs; Mental Health Associations; Catholic Charities; and others are legal or social service providers. CASA programs within administering agencies are guided by Advisory Boards that work with the Program Director and the umbrella Board of Directors (See Chapter Two, *Guiding Documents*). The CASA Director reports to the Executive Director of the host agency.

The remaining programs in the state are independent non-profits. They are overseen by a Board of Directors and managed by an Executive Director, responsible for program management, volunteer supervision and resource development. In many programs the Executive Director is a one-man (or woman) show; some have grown to add staff such as volunteer coordinators or administrative/clerical support.

CASA program directors across the state represent a diversity of age, education and background. Directors and staff include individuals with social work and law degrees, child protection workers, and former CASA volunteers. All share a commitment to helping children and a dedication to strengthening the quality of CASA. Program directors must constantly reach out to the community to educate about CASA and the needs of abused and neglected children in order to recruit volunteers and raise funds to support the program. Directors work very hard to let their volunteers know how much their services are appreciated and what a vital difference they are making in the lives of children.

Counties Served: Chronological List by Startup Dates
with Other Counties Served by the Program

New York City 1979 (New York – 1979; Kings – 1979; Queens – 19xx; Bronx - 19xx; and Richmond – 19xx)	Sullivan 1994
Monroe 1981	Oneida..... 1995 (CASA of Oneida and Herkimer Counties)
Jefferson 1986 (CASA of Jefferson and Lewis Counties)	Herkimer 1995 (CASA of Oneida and Herkimer Counties)
Nassau 1986 (Family Court Advocate Program w/ Suffolk)	Onondaga..... 1996
Orange 1986	Dutchess..... 2001
Rockland 1987	Essex 2001
Chemung 1988 (CASA of the Southern Tier w/Schuyler & Steuben)	Fulton..... 2002 (CASA of Fulton and Montgomery Counties)
Schenectady..... 1988	Montgomery 2002 (CASA of Fulton and Montgomery Counties)
Suffolk..... 1988 (Family Court Advocate Program w/Nassau)	Steuben 2002 (CASA of the Southern Tier w/Schuyler & Chemung)
Ulster 1989	Otsego 2003 (CASA of Chenango and Otsego Counties)
Westchester 1989	Chautauqua 2003
Albany 1990 (Capital District CASA w/Rensselaer)	Chenango 2004 (CASA of Chenango and Otsego Counties)
Erie 1991	Rensselaer 2004 (Capital District CASA w/Albany)
Genesee 1991	Tioga 2006 (Voices for Children w/Broome)
Broome 1992 (Voices for Children w/Tioga)	Lewis..... 2006 (CASA of Jefferson/Lewis Counties)
Schuyler..... 1994 (CASA of the Southern Tier w/Steuben & Chemung)	Ontario 2007

WHAT IS OUR STATEWIDE NETWORK?

Programs listed by County (Bold), Program Name and Administering Agency (Italic) where appropriate

Albany & Rensselaer Counties

Capital District CASA
Mediation Matters 518-446-0356

Broome & Tioga

Voices For Children
Accord, Inc. 607-724-5153

CASA of Chautauqua County

716-753-4123

Chemung, Schuyler & Steuben

CASA of the Southern Tier
607-936-2272

CASA of Chenango & Otsego Counties

607-336-1982

CASA of Dutchess County

*The Mental Health Association of Dutchess
County* 845-473-2500 x 323

Erie County CASA

Voices For Children
Boys & Girls Clubs of Buffalo, Inc
716-825-1016

CASA of Essex County 518-546-3492

CASA of Fulton & Montgomery Counties

Centro Civico of Amsterdam
518-842-3762 x 207

Genesee County CASA For Children

585-344-2550 x 2334, 2435

CASA of Jefferson & Lewis Counties

*The Resolution Center of Jefferson and
Lewis Counties* 315-785-0333

CASA of Rochester/Monroe County

585-428-5297

Nassau County

Family Court Advocate Program
EAC, Inc. 516-564-7835 x 129

New York City CASA

212-334-4010 X 137

CASA of Oneida & Herkimer Counties

315-724-1718 x 137

Onondaga Casa

Center for Community Alternatives
315-422-5638 x 223

CASA of Ontario County

Catholic Charites Of The Finger Lakes
315-789-2686 x 116

Orange County CASA

*The Dispute Resolution Center of Orange
and Putnam Counties*
845-294-8082 x 26

CASA of Rockland County

845-638-5678

CASA of Schenectady County

The Center for Community Justice
518-346-1281

Suffolk CASA

EAC, Inc. 631-853-4260

Sullivan County CASA

845-794-3000 x 3145

CASA of Ulster County 845-339-7543

CASA of Westchester County

The Mental Health Association
914-345-3993 x 208

WHAT IS CASA: ADVOCATES FOR CHILDREN OF NEW YORK STATE (CASANYYS)?

CASA: Advocates for Children of New York State (CASANYYS) is the statewide non-profit association serving the local CASA programs across New York State. CASANYYS presents a unified voice in support of the best interests of all New York State CASA programs. This coordinated approach distinguishes our network as one that is committed to the welfare of abused and neglected children in all jurisdictions.

CASANYYS' vision is that all children have a right to a safe and permanent home and all children deserve the support and involvement of their community when that safety is violated.

CASANYYS' mission is to promote and support trained community volunteer advocacy programs that assist Family Courts in making those critical determinations affecting the outcomes for abused and neglected children by supporting local CASA programs through training, technical assistance, and information; facilitating the flow of information to, from and among local programs; promoting and assisting the development of new CASA programs throughout the state; gathering and processing data from local programs; formulating and delivering training programs; seeking aggregate funding for CASA programs statewide; and continuing to improve the quality of CASA services available across New York State. CASANYYS also provides a voice for children among the public and its representatives in the state legislature and works to raise public awareness of the needs of abused and neglected children and the hope that CASA provides.

Over time, as the network has grown, there has been increasing standardization of case reports, memoranda of understanding with the courts and social services, volunteer training, data collection, and program management. Both CASANYYS and the National CASA Association played key roles in facilitating core standards among programs, while preserving their ability to respond to the particular needs of the courts and communities they serve. As programs grew up around New York State, local program directors began to identify a need for communication, consistency, and a presence with state policy makers. They formed a State Association in 1991 to provide support, training and technical assistance to their network and assist in the start up of new programs.

The state's Task Force on Permanency Planning took on the Association as a project and procured funding for a part-time state coordinator. The Association became its own independent 501(c)3 non-profit in 1994 and hired its first full-time Executive Director in 1997. The Association is now termed CASA: Advocates for Children of NYS (CASANYYS).

CASANYYS is governed by a board of directors that includes members of the legal, social service, business, and not-for-profit communities as well as representatives of the local CASA programs. There are a number of active board committees that meet throughout the year, addressing issues such as program management, policy issues, board governance and resource development. Every three years, the board revises its Strategic Plan to govern Association activities and support the work of our local programs.

CASANYS' key role is to provide services needed by the local CASA programs to maintain and improve the quality of services to Family Courts. Technical support is provided via telephone; internet; a state listserv; publications; regional and statewide meetings; and individual program visits. Local programs are provided information on a regular basis through newsletters, faxed alerts, and via email and website. CASANYS regularly surveys the local programs regarding their satisfaction with services and to determine their communication and training needs. CASANYS works closely with the National CASA Association and with UCS to coordinate technical assistance, training and quality assurance.

Every CASA program in the state is an affiliate of CASANYS, as required by National CASA Quality Assurance Standards and Court Rules. Affiliate status is obtained by adhering to state program standards and paying annual dues.

CASANYS was formed in large part to assist the local CASA programs in obtaining funding for their own operations. When the association was formed, there was no statewide allocation to local programs and each director needed to devote the majority of his or her time to resource development. This severely compromised CASA programs' ability to recruit, train and supervise more volunteers and serve all of the children who need us. Central to the CASANYS mission has been to obtain funding, not only to support the training and technical assistance efforts of CASANYS, but to procure fiscal and in-kind support for the network.

Funding to support CASANYS activities within the network is obtained from a variety of sources, including the National CASA Association, the Interest on Lawyer Account (IOLA), and UCS. CASANYS also sells products, conducts annual campaigns, and has held fundraisers to expand the resource base.

CASANYS works collaboratively with both UCS and the National CASA Association to support and represent CASA Programs. CASANYS is the conduit to communications with National CASA.

WHAT IS THE UCS CASA ASSISTANCE PROGRAM?

In 2005, New York State Chief Judge Judith S. Kaye convened a CASA Task Force. The group, chaired by retired Court of Appeals Justice Howard Levine, conducted a needs assessment, surveyed CASA program operations in other states and recommended the following:

1. The Unified Court System provide financial support to CASA programs;
2. Rules be established to govern the operation of CASA programs; and
3. The Office of Court Administration create an administrative office to support the operations of CASA programs.

These recommendations were promptly implemented in an unprecedented level of support and recognition for the CASA network in New York State.

In early 2006, new court rules were promulgated to standardize the use of CASA programs in the New York State courts. Rule of the Chief Judge (Part 43) and the companion Rule of the Chief Administrative Judge (Part 117) provide standards to which CASA Programs must comply in order to be eligible for appointment by the Family Court. The rules established a grant program to qualifying local CASA programs, as well as delineating required program structure, staff and volunteer qualifications, and confidentiality and reporting mandates. The rules require compliance with the National and State CASA standards, bringing those standards into the force of law.

The court rules also created the Unified Court System's UCS CASA Assistance Program (UCS) as an administrative unit within the Office of Court Administration. Housed within the Division of Court Operations' Office of Alternative Dispute Resolution and Court Improvement Programs, the CASA Assistance Program has the delegated authority to set programmatic guidelines, monitor and evaluate programs through site visits and case reviews, and administer a grant program to provide state funding to the CASA network. UCS also provides technical assistance and training to CASA programs and supports Family Courts currently utilizing or interested in starting a CASA program.

Also in 2006, the Uniform Rules of the Family Court Section 205.05 (5) were revised to permit access to court records by CASA.

UCS works collaboratively with both CASA: Advocates for Children of New York State and the National CASA Association, both independent non-profit associations supporting and representing CASA Programs. Many of New York State's judiciary are actively involved with the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (www.ncjfcj.org), which advocates to improve justice for children and families. NCJFCJ partners with National CASA on a number of initiatives including the newsletter, *The Judges Page* (www.nationalcasa.org/JudgesPage/index.htm).

WHAT IS TEAMWORK?

The CASA network across New York State continues to grow, with a vision of providing a volunteer advocate for every child who needs one. In 2007, the network consisted of twenty-four programs serving thirty-six counties with over 800 volunteers serving over 3,600 at-risk children. More than a million of America's children are confirmed to be abused and neglected each year; the continued support and expansion of CASA is an integral tool to help those children stay safe. There are no other programs in the United States comparable to CASA's mission and model.

As a volunteer based program, CASA's integrity and effectiveness are dependent upon ongoing training and close supervision of the volunteers. To this end, UCS and CASANYS offer staff training and support as well as materials for volunteer training and case management.

A minimum of two program directors' meetings are held each year, joint efforts of CASANYS and UCS. These offer specific training and support as well as networking opportunities to draw on the wealth of experience, expertise, humor and compassion of your fellow directors.

CASANYS and UCS regularly collect data from the local programs regarding the children and families they serve, their staff and volunteers, budgets and fundraising efforts. This data is imperative to informing the sustenance and growth of CASA throughout the state. It is used to support funding requests and public awareness efforts. In an effort to streamline data collection and record keeping, the COMET Convergence Project is developing a uniform data collection system for CASA programs statewide to meet the needs of the NYS Unified Court System, New York State CASA Association, National CASA/OJJDP and to assist local programs in readily preparing reports to other funding and government sources. Data collection includes mechanisms to conduct outcome evaluations for individual CASA programs as well as measure effectiveness of CASA statewide. The project is a collaborative effort of UCS and CASANYS. Please read more about data collection in Chapter Eight of this guide, "Data Collection and Program Evaluation."

We provide models for the programs to use in developing program management tools, and assist wherever possible with grant requests, public presentations, training and information.

CASANYS and UCS each have key roles in developing CASA programs in new counties. We work closely with Family Court judges and local agencies to ensure that all stakeholders in the county are involved in the process; that the program is developing in adherence with court rules as well as state and national standards; and that it ultimately will provide the highest quality of service to children and families in that county.

Ultimately, UCS and CASANYS model the collaborative teamwork that best facilitates safe, permanent homes for our most vulnerable children.