

# Site Visit Report: CASA Volunteers as Educational Advocates, System Liaisons, Facilitators, and Role Models

**Award #:** 90CO1074

**Cluster:** Child Welfare-Education System Collaborations to Increase Educational Stability

**Grantee:** State of Utah Department of Human Services

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## SUMMARY

In fiscal year 2011, the Children's Bureau released a funding opportunity announcement titled "Education System Collaborations to Increase Educational Stability" and awarded 10 17-month grants. The State of Utah Department of Human Services (DHS) received one of these awards to implement its CASA Volunteers as Education Advocates, System Liaisons, Facilitators, and Role Models project. The primary focus of this statewide project, which ended in February 2013, is to utilize volunteers from the existing [State Court Appointed Special Advocate \(CASA\)](#) program to gather information about the education status of children in foster care and, if needed, serve as education advocates for them.

The CASAs use a one-page form developed by the project to collect education information about the children in their cases. The following are some of the questions on the form:

- Type of school setting (e.g., Youth In Custody classroom, mainstream, special education)?
- How many missed days of school this year? Why?
- Date of last education evaluation or assessment? Results?
- Is the child on target academically? Explain.
- Does the child have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), a Standardized Education Plan (SEP), or a Section 504? If so, is the plan meeting the child's needs?
- Any barriers to participation in extracurricular activities?

CASAs collect the information by working with teachers, other school staff, the child's family, therapists, and others. Because of the confidential nature of the information the CASAs are trying to gather, they sometimes meet resistance from school staff or others. They carry identification badges and paperwork that show they are entitled to education information about the children they are supporting.

The CASAs generally complete the form before each review hearing. After the CASAs complete the form, they provide it concurrently to a CASA coordinator in their district and the guardian *ad litem*. The coordinator distributes the form to the other parties, including the other attorneys, the judge, and the caseworker, who review the form prior to the hearing. During the hearing, the judge may mention the form and even directly ask the CASA questions about the child's education status.

The CASAs are not required to provide education advocacy for the children they support, but they are encouraged to by the project when the need arises.

When the project began, there were 197 CASAs, and as of January 2013, there were 526 CASAs. The project has used various strategies to recruit CASAs, including the customization of



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a video by the National CASA Association for audiences in Utah. The 3-minute video is available on YouTube: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j77tCpk7cCo&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j77tCpk7cCo&feature=youtube_gdata_player).

Aside from benefiting the child by having another supportive adult in their lives who is focused on their education, this project helps the professionals involved in the case. Caseworkers know they will not need to track down education information, which frees them to concentrate on other aspects of the case. The judges are also grateful for the additional information. One judge noted that the education form and other additional information received from the CASA help her with case decision-making. She also explained how having the CASA and others involved in the case focus on education helps all parties see they are on the same team, particularly for the birth family. It helps show that everyone is looking out for the child's best interests and reduces suspicions about others' intentions.

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## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

### Abstract

In fiscal year 2011, the Children's Bureau released a funding opportunity announcement titled "Education System Collaborations to Increase Educational Stability" and awarded 10 17-month grants. The State of Utah Department of Human Services (DHS) received one of these awards to implement its CASA Volunteers as Education Advocates, System Liaisons, Facilitators, and Role Models project. The primary focus of this statewide project is to utilize volunteers from the existing [State Court Appointed Special Advocate \(CASA\)](#) program to gather information about the education status of children in foster care and, if needed, serve as education advocates for them.

This section describes the background and need for the project, how the CASAs gather information and advocate for the children, recruitment and marketing, training, and next steps.

### Background and Need for Project

One specific incident did not give rise to the DHS project; rather, several factors over time contributed to Utah developing the initiative. The following provides some context of the project's development.

One Utah initiative that connects foster care and education issues is the [Youth In Custody](#) (YIC) program, which began in 1979 and provides funding for school districts to educate youth in the custody of DHS, in an equivalent agency of a Native American Tribe recognized by the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, or in a juvenile detention facility. YIC is housed in the State Office of Education. The YIC [Coordinating Council](#) manages and distributes funds—most recently \$18 million annually—set aside in a line item by the Utah State Legislature to assist with the education of children in foster care. These funds are used to provide education services for children in mainstream schools, residential treatment facilities, and other education environments who are also in foster care and/or the juvenile justice system. These funds also support a mentor program for children in foster care in mainstream schools. The mentors are school district employees and are an additional adult who can provide education support and a continuous relationship with the child.

In 2005, the Chief Justice of the Utah Supreme Court established the Initiative on Utah Children in Foster Care (IOU) to improve outcomes for children in foster care. IOU was the impetus for much collaborative work between many different systems, such as child welfare, education, and juvenile justice. The IOU invited children in foster care to speak on various panels to the group about their experiences, including education, while in foster care. In 2007, the IOU formed an Education Subcommittee to further explore these issues.

The court system also recognized the deficit of information about the education status of children in foster care. Due to large caseloads, limited resources, and competing priorities, caseworkers frequently did not know current, detailed education information about the children in their caseloads, and usually no one else involved with the case could immediately provide that information either. In one rural area, a judge eventually required the local school district to staff a full-time employee in the court to provide real-time information about children on his docket. Judges also realized that it was difficult to develop a collaborative relationship between the schools and the court system, especially if a child moved between school districts during the case. Additionally, children in foster care often did not have someone who could effectively advocate for their education needs.

During the course of these discussions, State officials and staff determined that they did not need to institute a large systemic change to make a difference; they wanted to focus on individual cases and children. They started to think about how to leverage someone already in the lives of children in foster care to provide education support. This spurred the idea of using CASAs, who were already involved in many child welfare cases, to track and identify information about the education status of children in foster care and, if needed, serve as education advocates. This line of thinking was being explored when the Children's Bureau funding opportunity announcement was released, and it appeared to be a perfect match.

The CASA program in Utah is coordinated through the Office of Guardian ad Litem within the Utah State Courts. A guardian *ad litem* (GAL), who in Utah must be an attorney, is assigned to every case that involves child abuse and neglect, and a CASA volunteer is assigned to assist the GAL when requested by the child welfare caseworker, GAL, or judge. GALs may be assigned many cases at a time, but each CASA is only assigned one case at a time. A case may involve multiple children if it is for a sibling group. The CASA is focused on the needs of the child and assists in gathering information for the case, identifying resources and services, advocating for the child, and monitoring court orders and the treatment plan.

With the CASAs already involved in the children's lives and gathering information on other issues, DHS staff believed that the collection of education information and education advocacy would be a natural fit. CASAs develop a good rapport with the children and are seen by the children as not being part of the "system" (i.e., they are not paid to care about them). CASAs also are neutral parties and are trusted by the judges.

As part of the planning phase of the project, DHS sought out other programs across the country that used CASAs or other neutral third parties to collection education information about children in foster care; however, staff could not find a similar program.

### **Gathering Education Information**

To assist the CASAs in collecting education information, the project developed the CASA Education Questionnaire. This form is based on a [judicial checklist](#) developed by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ). The project piloted the NCJFCJ checklist with a judge, and his feedback was that the form, which is four pages, was too long. The project pared down the number of questions and developed a one-page form. The following items are included in the form:

- Type of school setting (e.g., YIC classroom, mainstream, special education)?
- Name of school/teacher?
- If not attending school, what education services is the child receiving and from whom?
- Length of time in current school?
- How many missed days of school this year? Why?
- Date of last education evaluation or assessment? Results?

- Is the child on target academically? Explain.
- Does the child have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), a Standardized Education Plan (SEP), or a Section 504? If so, is the plan meeting the child's needs?
- Areas in which the child excels in school?
- Extracurricular activities the child is involved in?
- Any barriers to participation in extracurricular activities?
- Has the CASA identified someone to become the child's education advocate once the juvenile case concludes? Who? Explain.

CASAs collect education information by working with teachers, other school staff, the child's family, therapists, and others. Because of the confidential nature of the information the CASAs are trying to gather, they sometimes meet resistance from school staff or others. CASAs carry identification badges and paperwork that show they are entitled to education information about the children they are supporting. The paperwork describes how Utah law provides CASAs with the right to obtain the education information and includes the following:

- Under the Federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), education records can be disclosed without parental consent in certain circumstances, such as when the release is required to comply with a court order.
- Every child involved in a juvenile court child welfare case is assigned a GAL who acts on behalf of the child's best interests.
- The court order appointing the GAL orders the release of education records to the GAL.
- Utah code states that a GAL may use a trained volunteer (i.e., a CASA) to assist in the investigation, and the CASA is therefore entitled to the records as a representative of the GAL.

The CASA coordinators visited the schools in their districts to alert school staff of the need for CASAs to obtain the education information and address any of their issues or concerns.

The project designed the form so that the questions corresponded to existing data fields in SAFE, Utah's Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS). Caseworkers are supposed to enter education information about children in their caseload at the beginning of every school year, but they do not always enter this information, nor is this requirement enforced.

The CASAs generally complete the form before each review hearing. After the CASAs complete the form, they provide it concurrently to a CASA coordinator in their district and the GAL. The coordinator distributes the form to the other parties, including the other attorneys, the judge, and the caseworker, who review the form prior to the hearing. During the hearing, the judge may mention the form and even directly ask the CASA questions about the child's education status.

The CASAs are not required to provide education advocacy for the children they support, but they are encouraged to by the project when the need arises. Aside from working within the school system to advocate for these children, the CASAs also can report any issue to the court that may require judicial intervention. Additionally, the CASAs help identify someone in the child's permanent family who can take over as the educational advocate when the case is closed.

### **Recruitment and Marketing**

The project has incorporated a recruitment and marketing component to increase the number of CASAs and to educate the general public about the issues faced by children in foster care, including how it affects their education. The project customized a video by the National CASA Association for audiences in Utah. The 3-minute video is available on YouTube: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j77tCpk7cCo&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j77tCpk7cCo&feature=youtube_gdata_player).

The project also is developing a 30-second version of the video to be seen in 178 movie theaters before each movie. The project also has used billboards and newspaper advertisements, as well

as personal recruitment by existing CASAs, to recruit additional volunteers. When the project began, there were 197 CASAs, and as of January 2013, there were 526 CASAs who had been recruited and trained. The project estimates it would need 1,400 CASAs in order to have one for each child welfare case that includes a school-aged child.

## **Training**

As of January 2013, all CASAs in Utah, including CASAs who began volunteering prior to the grant award, were trained about the education component. New CASAs receive 40 hours of training, with 2 of those hours dedicated to the education component. The training includes how to collect the information and the policies regarding information sharing.

The CASAs also receive training about how to advocate for a child in the school system, including how to determine if and how much advocacy is required, school placement options, special education evaluations, and record transfers. The project also is developing a new training about education advocacy that is based on one created by the National CASA Association.

The project held the Endless Dreams conference in January 2013 to initiate additional discussion about the education needs of children in foster care and provide training to those who support these children. The conference, which was attended by 225 CASAs, mentors, other educators, and other State and local staff, included sessions focusing on the education needs of youth, the child welfare system, trauma-affected learning, and collaboration and coordination to enact system change. All the presenters were from Utah to give a local emphasis to the content.

## **Next Steps**

The project ended in February 2013. Although some funding may be required to maintain the increased recruitment, marketing, and administrative efforts, much of the project was developed with sustainability in mind. The primary staff resource—the CASAs—are volunteers, and the education component training is already part of the regular CASA training.

During the time remaining in the project after the site visit, the project was seeking to address the following:

- Finish designing and developing a training for educators about the connections between foster care and the education system. This training will be mandatory for any educators whose pay is supported, in full or part, by the YIC line item.
- Establish CASAs as the special education surrogates for children in foster care. When children are eligible for special education, they receive an IEP. Because these children are in out-of-home care, the birth parents may not be able to sign the IEP. Caseworkers are prohibited from signing the IEP, and so the school districts have neutral surrogates sign them. The foster parents may be able to act as the surrogate, but this is not possible for children in residential treatment. The project is looking into having the CASAs trained as surrogates.

## **SITE VISIT HIGHLIGHTS**

The site visit occurred on January 23–24, 2013, in Salt Lake City, UT. The following is an overview of the meetings that occurred and the individuals that were present:

### **Day 1**

- Utah Department of Human Services (DHS) Main Office: General discussion about the project (Laurieann Thorpe, State Education Specialist, Utah DHS; Jamie Hinsz, Policy Specialist, Utah DHS)
- Third District Juvenile Court, West Jordan

- Attended two review hearings for children in foster care (Mary Lucero, CASA Administrator, Utah Office of Guardian ad Litem and CASA; Ms. Thorpe; Ms. Hinsz)
- Met with two CASAs to discuss their experiences (Barbara Peterson, CASA; Michelle Tarkeshian, CASA; Ms. Lucero; Ms. Thorpe; Ms. Hinsz)
- Met with Judge Decker in her chambers (Judge Christine Decker, Third District Juvenile Court; Ms. Thorpe; Ms. Lucero; Ms. Hinsz)
- Matheson Courthouse: General discussion about the project (Misty Butler, Project Coordinator, Court Improvement Program, Administrative Office of the Courts; Lisa-Michele Church, Juvenile Court Administrator, Administrative Office of the Courts; Raymond Wahl, Deputy State Court Administrator, Administrative Office of the Courts)

## Day 2

- DHS Main Office:
    - General discussion about the project (Tanya Albornoz; Foster Care Program Administrator, DHS; Ms. Thorpe)
    - Discussion about project's relation to Youth In Custody program (Travis Cook, Youth In Custody Director, Utah State Office of Education; Ms. Thorpe)
    - General discussion about the project (Marie Christman, Deputy Director, DHS; Ms. Thorpe)
- Discussion about project evaluation (Matt Davis, Project Evaluator, University of Utah College of Social Work; Ms. Thorpe)

## LESSONS LEARNED

- Utah citizens place a large emphasis on volunteerism, which provides the project with an excellent staffing foundation. CASA volunteers generally want a more in-depth experience, and so having a dedicated volunteer base in the community is essential. This type of project would be difficult in an area that did not have volunteers with enough time or dedication or for a CASA program that struggled to retain or recruit volunteers.
- It would be challenging to replicate this type of project statewide in a county-administered State because of the difficulty navigating multiple sets of policies and partners in each county.
- It is important to provide the people involved with the initiative an opportunity to interact and problem-solve (e.g., summits, conferences). This allows them to learn from each other's experiences and provide support.
- The caseworkers are grateful to have another party gather education information. It frees their time to concentrate on other aspects of the case and keeps them current on the education status of the children in their caseload.
- Now that the CASAs are collecting and disseminating education information, they are more actively involved in the court hearings, with the judges asking them questions about the children's education status. Rather than sitting in the gallery, CASAs now sit at the table with the guardian *ad litem*, DHS attorney, and the child, if present. During the court hearings the author attended, the judge commented on the education form and then asked the CASA for additional details. This increased involvement also gives the CASAs a more defined purpose and allows them to be the expert on one aspect of the case.
- Although the Endless Dreams conference was considered to be very successful, it would have been beneficial for frontline Division of Children and Family Services staff to attend. This would have helped improve the relationships and understanding between them and the CASAs and educators.
- Many former educators, including some high-level staff, and their spouses began volunteering as CASAs after the project began. Examples include a retired district superintendent and the former head of special education technical assistance. While this was unexpected, it provides the project with excellent momentum to recruit others and opens up a new target population for recruitment.

- The following lessons learned are from a discussion with a juvenile court judge:
  - She is grateful for the additional information. The education form and other additional information received from the CASA help her with the case decision-making process. Although the safety of the child is the paramount influence, the information provides balance to the reasons behind her decision.
  - She was pleased that there is someone involved with the case that is aware of the education issues and is looking out for the education of the child. This helps get others to focus on education, too.
  - Having the CASA and others involved in the case focus on education helps all parties see they are on the same team, particularly for the birth family. It helps show that everyone is looking out for the child's best interests and reduces suspicions about others' intentions.
  - This focus on education lets the birth and foster parents know that the court values education, which will hopefully increase their focus on education.

### **Successful Strategies**

- Having State leadership involved has been critical to maintaining focus on the program. For example, the Chief Justice's leadership through the Initiative on Utah Children in Foster Care was a key component to establishing relationships between the Department of Human Services and the State Office of Education. Additionally, the State Juvenile Court Administrator has been a key supporter. This has helped the project get an audience with the judges to explain the project and keep the court's attention on children's education while in foster care.
- A critical component was getting the support of the 41 school districts across the State. Many districts and individual schools had concerns about student confidentiality. The project explained to the education system that the CASAs had a right to the education information, per the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), and emphasized that CASAs can assist the education system. The CASAs act as a neutral third party that can explain the education status of the child and the school's decisions to the court without the education system needing to be directly involved in the courtroom. When some State or local education officials raised objections about sharing information, the Chief Justice met with the State school superintendent to explain the legal issues involved and alleviate the education system's concerns.
- The Office of Guardian ad Litem provides infrastructure and coordination for the volunteers, which has been invaluable. This also is a sustainable process because the office is not funded through the grant.
- Cross-training opportunities help those in education and child welfare learn more about the other system and learn how to "speak the same language." It also helps ensure there are more well-rounded individuals assisting children.
- One of the CASAs noted that the training and support she received from the project was very helpful. During her training, training participants were told who to contact if issues or questions arose, as well as online resources. She liked how her CASA training included veteran volunteers who gave their perspective.

### **Recommendations**

- Projects should develop online courses so that the CASAs can refer to the materials as needed (recommended by a CASA).
- When planning the initiative, projects should maximize their available resources before creating something new. For example, the project used an existing volunteer base as the backbone of its effort rather than starting from scratch.
- Projects do not need to use CASAs for staffing, but they should ensure that the staff has time to dedicate to the issue and has the trust of the court.

- A juvenile court judge recommended that education forms be completed for every case, including juvenile delinquency cases.
- Projects should educate caseworkers and foster parents about the initiative from the beginning. They should be taught about CASAs and their role as well as the importance of focusing on the education of children in foster care. Projects should let caseworkers know when it may be appropriate to request a CASA for a case and how to do so.

## **OUTCOMES**

The Social Research Institute (SRI) of the University of Utah College of Social Work is conducting the project evaluation. With the short duration of the grant (17 months), SRI only is able to conduct a process evaluation. The evaluation focuses on four project objectives (followed by the applicable data to be collected):

1. Performance indicators
  - a. Number of CASA volunteers recruited
  - b. Number of CASAs trained
  - c. Number of education, child welfare, and juvenile court personnel trained on the role of CASA volunteers
  - d. Number of foster youth served by CASA volunteers
  - e. Characteristics of CASA matches, including length and frequency of CASA involvement
2. Effectiveness of the training education model
  - a. Observed trainings and completed online training
  - b. Number of CASAs trained
  - c. Additional observations during scheduled trainings
3. Assess impact on collaborations
  - a. Endless Dreams conference survey
  - b. Meeting minutes
  - c. Observations from meetings and conference
4. Assess impact on services provided by CASA volunteers
  - a. Interview protocol being developed