

# CASA In Juvenile Justice: the Time Has Come

**W**e all know about CASA – Court Appointed Special Advocates. We know the positive impact that community volunteers have on children caught in the child welfare system. We know how valuable these volunteers are to the juvenile court judge, writing court reports for the child they represent and making recommendations to the judge about what action the judge should take.

We may not know the many other benefits the CASA program provides. For one, it educates the community through its volunteers about the otherwise secret court proceedings in juvenile dependency court. It often provides support for dependent children long after the case has been dismissed. During my tenure in juvenile dependency court, I watched attorneys participate as CASA volunteers and then follow the children far into adulthood. I watched a judicial colleague and his spouse adopt a disabled child who was a ward of the court. I also watched the Department of Family and Children's Services become the leading source of referrals to the program after publicly criticizing me for starting the program over 35 years ago.

In some local programs the children in the juvenile justice system are appointed CASA volunteers. This presents some problems



because there are usually not enough volunteers to fulfill the need in the local juvenile dependency court. Nevertheless, it is now clear that CASA volunteers for youths in the juvenile justice system can make an enormous difference in the future of these youths.

A recent study confirms my belief. Forty-one youths were assigned to the CASA program and thirty-eight were selected for the comparison group. The youths were selected from three California counties. The charges involved were similar. The study measured self-efficacy and subsequent arrests or citations for probation violations. The important finding was that CASA volunteers significantly improved outcomes for adolescents on probation, both in their perceptions of academic self-efficacy and overall self-efficacy. Youths assigned to CASA volunteers were significantly less likely to experience an arrest for a new offense. The study concludes that the development of meaningful relationships and having the opportunity to develop social bonds with positive adults during adolescence is profoundly important.

These findings are consistent with a local program in Santa Clara County I wrote about in these pages a few years ago, the Mentor-Tutor Connection (MTC) where teachers identify youths they believe will not graduate from high school and younger students who are struggling in grammar school. Each of these children is assigned a mentor or tutor depending on their age. Last year, every high school youth identified (119 in all) were assigned a tutor and all of them graduated!

Expanding existing CASA programs to include youths in the juvenile justice system should interest all juvenile court judges. Finding and training volunteers will be a challenge, but the use of volunteers will likely produce positive results, reduce recidivism, and increase emotional growth. 🌱



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