A report by Texas CASA

The CASA eVOLution

CREATING SAFE, POSITIVE FUTURES FOR ALL TEXAS CHILDREN.

A report by Texas CASA
TEXAS CASA VISION
A safe and positive future for all Texas children.

TEXAS CASA MISSION
To support local CASA volunteer advocacy programs and to advocate for effective public policy for children in the child protection system.

THE CASA WAY
We have an uncompromising belief that we will achieve what others think is impossible, and each of us is an essential part of the solution.
The CASA eVOLution
CREATING SAFE, POSITIVE FUTURES FOR ALL TEXAS CHILDREN.

BY TEXAS CASA
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Since its founding in 1989, Texas CASA has striven to constantly improve and turn the vision of a safe, positive future for all Texas children into a reality by providing groundbreaking initiatives and strong leadership at the Capitol.

Texas CASA is part of a national volunteer movement that began in 1977 when a Seattle judge started using community volunteers – everyday citizens – as a “voice in court” for abused and neglected children. These Court Appointed Special Advocates® (CASA) provided him with the detailed information he needed to safeguard the children’s best interests and make sure that their unique needs were met during their time in care. The program in Seattle was so successful that it was replicated around the nation.

Three years later, the first local CASA program was established in Texas. By 1989, there were 13 local CASA programs in Texas. Texas CASA was formed that same year when a passionate CASA volunteer from one of the state’s local CASA programs had a vision of a statewide hub – an organization belonging to everyone in Texas working tirelessly in pursuit of the same mission. Texas CASA is now in its 30th year of service, as a trusted partner of communities and legislators, and an investment in Texas CASA remains an investment in Texas’ future.

Today, CASA has evolved into one of the largest volunteer organizations in the country. In Texas, there are 72 local CASA programs with nearly 11,000 volunteers serving more than 30,000 children in foster care in 217 counties. At the local level, the CASA programs in Texas do the hands-on work of recruiting, training and supervising volunteers. These local programs equip CASA volunteers with the tools necessary to speak up in court and represent the best interests of children. As the statewide organization, Texas CASA provides financial support and services to help ensure the state’s local CASA programs operate effectively so that they are able to prioritize volunteer recruitment and training. CASA volunteers are held to a high standard – to work tirelessly and diligently to help children during their time in care.

Many things have changed over the years, but Texas CASA has remained focused on one primary vision: a safe and positive future for all Texas children.

From facilitating systemic change at the Capitol to collaborating with local Child Protective Services (CPS) in support of families, Texas CASA continues to enhance the way CASA volunteers advocate
for children and families involved with the child welfare system. As part of efforts to improve CASA advocacy, in 2013 Texas CASA partnered with the local CASA programs and commissioned a Child Outcomes Study. This initial study was designed and conducted by Dr. Cynthia Osborne with the Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin. To date, this is the largest study conducted of the contributions and effectiveness of CASA in child protection cases. The objectives of the study were to:

1. Evaluate the contributions of CASA to the safety, permanency and well-being of children and youth in state care, and
2. Identify the factors and activities that contribute to CASA's effectiveness in attaining positive outcomes.

The results of this initial study provided Texas CASA with information key to growing its extensive network, informing policy and strengthening training. Texas CASA has established the CASA Advocacy Coalition that will determine a new logic model and strategic plans based off the findings of the initial survey. Texas CASA looks forward to leveraging these findings to better support volunteer advocacy effectiveness and successful child outcomes in the areas of safety, permanency and well-being.

Additionally the implementation process of this study unveiled the limitations of available data in IMPACT, the data collection system used by CPS. The study was based upon data in IMPACT which resulted in an incomplete assessment, as important components of child well-being were either missing or could not be fully addressed. Due to the lack of available data, more research is needed to better understand CASA's effects on certain child outcomes and child well-being. While Texas CASA works to fully understand the implications of the initial study's findings, it recognizes the need for better metrics in order to develop much-needed data surrounding child safety, permanency and well-being.

The safety, permanency and well-being of children and youth in care are the overarching areas of focus within the child welfare system. CASA volunteers contribute to and play an integral role in advocating for resources within each of these areas. For the past several years, steps have been taken to enhance the CASA network at every level through The CASA eVOLution initiative. This initiative proves CASA's dedication to moving forward and ensuring that the heart of the network, the VOLunteers, have the foundational tools and skills needed to make a difference in the life of a child.

The driving force of the network is, and always will be, the VOLunteers. These dedicated members of the community are the heart of the CASA movement – they are passionate and committed to ensuring children are safe and provided with the resources necessary to thrive during their time in care. Texas CASA's mission is to support local CASA programs and to advocate for effective public policy for children in the child protection system. It is our role to clear obstacles and challenges that limit the abilities of CASA volunteers to pave a path for higher quality advocacy.

By advocating for systemic change and developing initiatives, Texas CASA and the CASA network
are making the safety of children a high priority, lowering the risk of further abuse and trauma while in care, emphasizing reunification and the need for familial connections through collaboration with CPS and families, and promoting healing and well-being through a trauma-informed lens.

When a child enters the child welfare system, it is the system’s responsibility to ensure that child is safe and cared for. Yet, once they leave the system, many children report experiencing abuse and neglect by their care providers. Additionally, due to their unique situation and past trauma, youth in care are at a higher risk of becoming victims of human trafficking. Texas CASA and the local programs are implementing advanced trainings and advocating for systemic changes to better safeguard children and youth from further harm once they are in care.

Texas CASA and the CASA network are rolling out new initiatives that incorporate the concepts and applications of relational permanence in addition to legal permanence. This focus on relationships emphasizes reunification and familial connections for children, and ensures all cases maintain a level of urgency until a child reaches permanency.

Experiencing abuse or neglect, removal from home, and entering the system cause trauma. Texas CASA recognizes that every child in care has experienced trauma in some capacity; and in order to ensure their well-being, the entire system needs to approach care with a trauma-informed lens. The CASA network continues to learn about and implement new tools and resources to advocate for the emotional needs as well as the physical needs of the children served.

Texas CASA and the CASA network grow each year, recruiting more volunteers to serve more children. The primary focus remains providing high-quality advocacy for all children in care. The network is dedicated to evolving and finding new ways to promote safety, permanency and well-being and has taken on the challenge of leading large-scale systemic change so that each child has the opportunity to obtain the safe, positive future they deserve.

The CASA eVOLution is the network’s dedicated approach to moving forward and ensuring that the heart of the network, the VOLunteers, have the foundational tools and skills needed to make a difference in the life of a child.
For Texas CASA and the CASA network, a child’s safety is the highest priority.

First filed in 2011, the ongoing lawsuit against the state of Texas’ Child Protective Services (CPS) system cites child safety as the primary issue. In her initial ruling in December 2015, U.S. District Judge Janis Jack found that Texas’ foster care system failed to protect children in long-term care from an unreasonable risk of harm.

Youth who age out of the foster care system frequently talk about how their rights were violated while in care. Oftentimes, these youth never report the incident due to fear of retaliation or mistrust of the staff who placed them in the foster home, group home or Residential Treatment Center (RTC). When youth do speak up and report allegations of abuse and/or neglect, their allegations are investigated by Child Care Licensing (CCL) and held to a different standard than the policies and practices implemented by the Department of Family & Protective Services (DFPS).

Children and youth who have had contact with the child welfare system are also at a higher risk of becoming victims of trafficking and exploitation. According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), 74 percent of identified victims of sex trafficking were in the legal custody of the state when they went missing. Traffickers have also been known to recruit vulnerable youth by targeting youth shelters, group homes and foster care facilities.

Many children and youth in foster care are at risk of experiencing additional abuse and neglect while in care. For Texas CASA and the CASA network, a child’s safety is the highest priority. At the state and local levels, the network has implemented several initiatives to continue to protect each and every child during and after their time in care.
Creating Systemic Change to Safeguard Children & Youth in Care

Texas CASA champions legislation at the State Capitol to ensure that children and youth are safe during their time in care and to decrease the risk of further abuse or neglect.

During the 84th Legislative Session in 2015, Texas CASA, in partnership with One Voice Texas, set out to make children and youth in state care feel safer by empowering them to report concerns about their placements. SB 830, championed by Texas CASA, established an ombudsman for children and youth in foster care within the Health & Human Services Commission’s (HHSC) Ombudsman’s Office – instead of within DFPS. This gives youth in care an independent resource to contact with concerns about their placement or case and ensures their concerns are handled with the highest level of transparency and accountability.

Prior to SB 830, the Office of Consumer Affairs, the ombudsman office for DFPS, was responsible for both recording complaints and providing an independent investigation for these complaints. However, the ombudsman office was not independent from DFPS in terms of budget, policy or personnel, meaning children and youth were expected to contact DFPS to file complaints about their DFPS cases and/or placements. Many youth cited that a main reason they did not report incidents of abuse and neglect in their placements was fear of retaliation. SB 830 also required DFPS and HHSC to continue to work together to develop policies regarding retaliation protection for reporters, to increase awareness of the ombudsman, and to report yearly data and trends to the legislature and the public.

The Ombudsman for Children and Youth in Foster Care (FCO) officially began operations on May 2, 2016, and in its first full year of operations, the FCO received more than 650 contacts, with 172 from individual youth3. Before SB 830, from September 1, 2014, through August 31, 2015, the DFPS Office of Consumer Affairs received 30 cases from youth in foster care4.

During the next legislative session in 2017, Texas CASA again championed several bills around safety for children and youth in foster care and advocated for a budget rider that added three additional full-time employees to the FCO. While challenges around informing youth about how and where to report abuse and neglect remain, CASA volunteers offer another outlet for youth to share and report their concerns. CASA volunteers develop relationships with the youth through monthly meetings and empower youth to share their experiences in their placements.

Another one of Texas CASA’s top legislative priorities for the 85th Session was to consolidate all abuse and neglect investigations within CPS, while moving the regulatory functions of Child Care Licensing (CCL) to HHSC. According to DFPS at the time, CPS “protects children from abuse and neglect through investigations, services, foster care and adoption,” while CCL “regulates daycare, foster care, adoption agencies, residential treatment centers, before- and after-school programs and maternity homes5.” While CPS is “child-focused,” CCL is considered “facility-focused.”
Both CPS and CCL were tasked with investigating allegations of abuse and neglect, but they were operating on two different definitions of abuse and neglect—leaving children in care at risk of further harm. In a Performance Management Unit review of CCL abuse or neglect investigation dispositions in 2012-2013, between 65-82 percent of CCL’s dispositions were found to be incorrect. In other words, in many cases, CCL was unable to determine if abuse or neglect had occurred against a child in foster care, but the Performance Management Unit found evidence in its review that it had occurred.

Ultimately, with Texas CASA’s support, the legislature enacted this systemic change in three different pieces of legislation (SB 11, HB 5 and HB 249). The CCL regulatory functions were transferred to HHSC on Sept. 1, 2017. However, DFPS made the decision to create a new, independent

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<th>COMPARISON OF POLICIES &amp; PROCEDURES PRIOR TO 85TH SESSION</th>
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<td><strong>Child Protective Services (CPS):</strong> Child-Focused</td>
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<td>2143.1; 2241.1 Time frame for initiating an investigation in highest priority cases where there is an &quot;immediate threat.. that could result in death or serious harm&quot; (e.g., child sexual abuse): 24-hour maximum after report</td>
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<td>CPS 2113.1 (Texas Family Code 261) Definitions of &quot;child abuse and neglect&quot; are comprehensive and include 5 additional types of abuse for more specificity and different situations</td>
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<td>2116 (Texas Family Code 261.001) Mandated to assess actual and risk of harm to children</td>
<td>6242 Mandated only to assess actual harm to children</td>
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<td>2241.33 Caseworker must interview children in private when possible</td>
<td>6421 No requirement for licensing staff to interview children in private</td>
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<td>2241.5 Interviews with children must occur at specialized facilities, such as children’s advocacy centers (CACs), whenever possible and appropriate</td>
<td>6421.1 Nothing in policy to address the use of specialized facilities such as CACs</td>
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<td>2241.5 Caseworkers can transport children by themselves under most circumstances (e.g., to a CASA for forensic interview)</td>
<td>6421.1 Staff are not permitted to transport children by themselves, even in circumstances where a CAC forensic interview is appropriate</td>
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Investigations Division rather than consolidate CCL investigations into the CPS investigation department, based on language in HB 5 (which makes DFPS a standalone agency).

Looking Forward

Through these systemic changes, Texas CASA is working to ensure that children and youth are safe during their time in care and not at further risk of abuse or neglect. Before each new legislative session, Texas CASA works with the local CASA programs to develop legislative priorities that focus on a variety of topics around safety, permanency and well-being.

Providing the Same Quality Advocacy to All Children Across Texas

Texas CASA is focused on providing new ways to maintain the highest level of advocacy for children no matter how far the placement is from their home community.

By National CASA standards, a CASA volunteer must visit with the child or youth they serve in person at least once a month. Due to a shortage of foster homes in Texas and inadequate data system, about 60 percent of children are placed outside their home counties. Some children are even placed hundreds of miles away, making monthly in-person visits difficult and costly. In these cases, a CASA volunteer can replace the monthly in-person visits with a phone call or video chat but must still have face-to-face contact every three months.

Texas CASA and the local CASA programs strongly believe that the value of in-person visits is essential to CASA advocacy and ensuring the safety of children and youth served. While the state

Change Leader:

Dallas CASA

In 2014, Dallas CASA established a partnership with Angel Flight, a volunteer program that helps people in need by providing free air transportation for medical and humanitarian purposes. Angel Flight’s volunteer pilots offer transportation at no cost to the passengers in order to ensure those in need are not denied assistance due to the barrier of distance. CASA’s partnership with Angel Flight has been expanding across the state as more and more local programs are joining forces with the organization to better serve children in care. National CASA recognized the unique collaboration with a Promising Practices Spotlight Award.

Angel Flight in Action: Bonnie grew up in her grandmother’s care. But when Bonnie was 13, her grandmother died and Bonnie went to live with her uncle. Six months later, Bonnie’s uncle called Child Protective Services to let them know he could no longer deal with her behavior. Still grieving her grandmother’s death, Bonnie felt that everyone she knew was abandoning her. When CPS moved her to a treatment center a five-hour drive from Dallas, she was despondent.

But Bonnie’s Dallas CASA volunteer, Jenny, had not forgotten about her. They’d visited in Dallas before her move and continued to connect by phone after the move. Jenny knew Bonnie needed to know how much she cared. With the help of the Angel Flight program, Jenny was able to visit Bonnie at the treatment center at least once a month. Bonnie was stunned the first time Jenny visited.

“Jenny, I can’t believe you came for me!” she cried when she saw Jenny.
works to expand Community Based Care and improve the number and quality of placements. **Texas CASA is focused on providing new ways to maintain the highest level of advocacy for children no matter how far the placement is from their home community.**

CASA visits are an integral part of certifying the safety of the children served, and Texas CASA puts a high priority on ensuring volunteers can effectively advocate for these children. Through the Courtesy CASA initiative and travel reimbursements, Texas CASA provides local CASA programs with the tools and resources to give every child served the face-to-face interaction that is essential to their safety and well-being.

The Courtesy CASA initiative is a new way local CASA programs and their volunteers can continue to visit children who have been placed outside of their community. Local CASA programs can request a Courtesy CASA to visit children who are in urgent need of an in-person visit that their volunteer or program cannot currently provide. Once a visit has been made, the Courtesy CASA can report their findings and provide pictures of the children and their placement directly to the local CASA program. The information gathered during these visits allow the primary CASA and their supervisor to make informed recommendations to the judge and ensure that the placement is safe and that the child’s needs are being met.

The child’s CASA is encouraged to participate in the visit via phone or video chat in order to help maintain their relationship with the child. This initiative allows for the unique benefit of still having a trained CASA visit the child face-to-face when the volunteer and program are not able to visit themselves.

In addition to Courtesy CASAs, Texas CASA reimburses local CASA programs for the cost of volunteers’ travel when visiting children that are placed outside of the county they serve. By taking off the financial burden of travel, more CASA volunteers are able to regularly meet with the children and youth they serve.

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<th>TRAVEL REIMBURSEMENTS</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>AMOUNT REIMBURSED</strong></td>
<td>FY2017: $210,000</td>
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<td>FY2018: $310,000</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL TRIPS</strong></td>
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<td><strong>MILES TRAVELED</strong></td>
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<td><em>estimated based on standard mileage rates</em></td>
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**Looking Forward**

Texas CASA continues to provide these services to local CASA programs while advocating in support of the expansion of Community Based Care which has shown to improve placement proximity and stability for children removed from their homes. As it is rolled out across Texas by DFPS, Texas CASA and local CASA programs remain actively engaged, vital partners with providers.
Decreasing Risk of Exploitation of Youth in Care

*CASA volunteers are in the unique position to identify and respond to key risk indicators for the youth they serve.*

In response to the increasing risks of youth involved in the foster care system becoming victims of sex trafficking, Texas CASA began partnering with other organizations to provide trainings and webinars for local CASA programs and at the Texas CASA Annual Conference. CASA volunteers are in the unique position to identify and respond to key risk indicators for the youth they serve. Both the Texas regional office of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) and the Institute on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault at The University of Texas at Austin have helped train more than 1,000 members of the CASA network on research regarding sex trafficking of minors and how to define and identify key risk indicators.

“The relationship developed between children and their CASA volunteers is one of trust, respect and honesty, uniquely situating the CASA volunteer to recognize when a teen has been trafficked or is at a high risk of becoming a victim. For many teenagers in foster care, home is a difficult place. When someone shows them ‘love and affection’ and offers them freedom from rigid rules, they may not recognize the danger,” says Kathleen LaValle, Dallas CASA President/CEO.

Dallas CASA is at the forefront of strengthening CASA advocacy specifically for victims of sex trafficking. The program received grant funding through the Office of the Texas Governor and National CASA to develop an advanced training curriculum that focuses on how to advocate for minor sex trafficking victims and high-risk youth. This is the first such curriculum and would be an additional 12 hours of training for current volunteers interested in assisting victims of sex trafficking. Once the curriculum is finalized, it will be shared across the network.

**Looking Forward**

Texas CASA will continue to provide training opportunities and resources to better equip CASA volunteers and staff to address this growing issue. Additionally, as part of Texas CASA’s Legislative Priorities for the 86th Legislative Session in 2019, CASA will advocate for resources and policy change to help prevent human trafficking and meet the needs of trafficking victims.

**Change Leader:**

**CASA of Travis County**

In 2017, CASA of Travis County became the first CASA program in the nation to be accredited by Praesidium, Inc. for excellence in child safety practices. Praesidium’s Safety Equation® “identifies eight organizational operations that provide opportunities to decrease the risk of abuse by employees, volunteers, or other program participants.” CASA of Travis County together with Praesidium, Inc. launched a new curriculum to train CASA personnel across Texas and nationally, to minimize the risk of sexual abuse of children served by CASA and to enhance child safety practices across the nation.
When a child is removed from home and placed in the child welfare system, they are assigned a Child Protective Services (CPS) caseworker and taken to an approved or licensed temporary placement. Depending on the child’s needs, the circumstances of the case, and availability, the placement may be:

- the home of an approved relative (kinship care),
- a foster home,
- a cottage home,
- an emergency shelter, or
- a residential treatment center (RTC) if they need more specialized care.

By law, DFPS has up to one year to develop and execute a plan to find the child a safe, permanent home. First and foremost, CPS, CASA and parties involved in the case advocate for reunification with family. If the child has not been reunified or found a permanent home within a year, a judge appoints a person to be legally responsible for a child without adopting the child. The court can give Permanent Managing Conservatorship (PMC) to someone other than a parent, including DFPS, a relative, a close family friend or a foster parent.

PMC cases, or long-term foster care cases, made up the affected class of the ongoing lawsuit against the Texas CPS system. There is a common misconception that children in PMC are older teens who are fated to languish in the system until they age out. In a three-year pilot project focused on advocating for children in PMC, Texas CASA found that the average age of children entering PMC was about 8 years old. Oftentimes, once the case moves to PMC, the urgency to find permanency for the child decreases, meaning their chance of a safe, permanent home becomes smaller and smaller with each passing day.

The state is not meant to be a permanent parent, and Texas CASA, in partnership with DFPS, has implemented new initiatives to keep children from moving to PMC while also refocusing urgency back to current PMC cases.
Setting the Course for Family Engagement

Texas CASA strives to improve collaboration with and outcomes for children and families.

In 2015, the 84th Legislature appropriated funds to DFPS and Texas CASA to work together in development of a statewide model of Family Finding known as Collaborative Family Engagement, or CFE.

With a focus on authentic family engagement, the CFE approach brings CASA, DFPS and CPS together to complete the work of Family Finding, as federal law requires. The goal of CFE is to establish and strengthen support networks around children and youth in foster care as well as for their family, and to improve permanency outcomes, both physical (legal) and relational (emotional).

CFE stresses the importance of:
1. Involvement of the support network in the planning and decision-making for the child or youth,
2. Placement with kin or fictive kin whenever possible but not as the first question posed, and
3. Connection as a contributing factor for positive child outcomes.

CFE is an integrated or embedded model of Family Finding in which CASA and CPS share the tasks of finding, engaging and involving family and fictive kin to build the supportive network - allowing more integration and transfer into standard case practice while modeling a team approach for the family. This differs from the traditional implementation model where the work falls to one Family Finding specialist, referred to as a delegated approach. In a delegated approach, the Family Finding specialist completes the first steps of the work and then transfers the work to the child protection worker for completion and follow up. Due to systemic constraints, this often leads to a nullification effect of the Family Finding work. In contrast, CFE utilizes 12 tools to find and engage families, 10 of which are new to CPS case practices, producing better results for those in the child welfare system.

In three years, there have been more than 100 unique trainings for local CASA and CPS staff. Now in its fourth year, CFE has expanded to 31 local CASA programs and their local CPS, representing about 44 percent of the statewide CASA network. A new CFE Manual and online e-learning course have also been introduced by Texas CASA to further support the work of CFE on the local level.

Looking Forward
CFE continues to roll out across the state. Through FY 2018, there have been:

• 358 family meetings,
• 383 families engaged in CFE, and
• 752 children and youth engaged in CFE.

As the initiative grows, Texas CASA is working with The University of Texas at Austin to evaluate the effectiveness of CFE on improving collaboration and outcomes for children and families.
Change Leader:
CASA of Travis County

Before the creation of CFE, CASA of Travis County set the course for family engagement through two initiatives.

In most cases, a CASA volunteer is appointed at the 14-day adversary hearing. CASA of Travis County worked with local judges to create the Early Family Engagement (EFE) program that allows CASA to accept ex parte appointments from the court. This ensures CASA is appointed at the time of removal at the show cause hearing, the very first hearing in the case when the judge initially grants the CPS Investigator permission to remove the child. This model has been implemented by local programs across the state and allows CASA to begin the process of Family Finding and engagement at the very beginning of the case.

CASA of Travis County was also the first CASA program in Texas to establish a Family Engagement program that became the basis of CFE. The program works to connect children and relatives who may not even be aware the children are in foster care by utilizing volunteers who identify, locate and contact these relatives and fictive kin and attempt to reengage them. The purpose behind Family Engagement is to achieve permanency faster, preferably with relatives; and, even if permanency is not achieved, to give children an understanding of their heritage and the supportive family members and other adults in their lives.

"By reengaging these family members, Family Engagement volunteers can position them as resources in a child’s life, building healthy connections where youth may otherwise have been isolated." - CASA of Travis County
Returning Urgency to PMC Cases

Recognizing the unique needs of children in long-term foster care, Texas CASA undertook the challenge of increasing training and advocacy for children in PMC.

With each case, the goal first and foremost is the reunification of the child with their parents. Unfortunately, this option is not always possible. In these situations, the children’s parents’ rights may be terminated – which means these children can be placed in the long-term care of the state.

Permanent Managing Conservatorship (PMC) is the legal term the state uses to identify these children. In 2014 prior to Judge Janis Jack’s ruling, Texas CASA recognized an increasing need for more CASA volunteers to serve children in long-term foster care. Texas CASA accepted this challenge by reaching out to Blue Cross Blue Shield of Texas for funding to create a project to better advocate for children in PMC status. The result is known as the PMC Project.

While developing the PMC Project, the fundamental goals in mind were to increase the number of volunteers committed to serving children in long-term foster care, explore and determine key methods to advocate for children in PMC at both the local and state levels, and work with 10 pilot CASA programs across the state to determine the ways to best serve youth in PMC.

There is a common misconception that children in PMC are older teens who are fated to languish in the system until they age out. The PMC Project focused on changing the traditional mindset of potential volunteers. Rather than assuming kids in long-term foster care are in it for the long haul, volunteers are encouraged to maintain a sense of urgency for finding these children permanent homes.

Looking Forward

A crucial component of the PMC Project was building the PMC Guidebook. Developed in collaboration with the pilot programs, the guidebook serves as an instruction manual for CASA programs across Texas to serve more youth in long-term foster care by recruiting volunteers and tailoring their advocacy specifically for PMC children.

The PMC Project was a three-year initiative, but the guidebook continues to be used by local CASA programs, and the principles learned during the project have been rolled into Collaborative Family Engagement (CFE).
Effectively Preparing & Assisting Older Youth Transitioning Out of Care

Texas CASA champions legislation to effectively assist Texas youth in preparing and planning for their transition out of foster care services.

When permanency is not reached before a child turns 18 years old, they often “age out” and leave the child welfare system. In Texas, youth can extend care and stay in the system until age 21. Each year in Texas, roughly 1,200 youth age out of foster care when they turn 18 years old. Without the support and guidance of caring adults and family, these youth are less likely to attend college and are more likely to experience homelessness and unemployment. Additionally, many youth who age out of care report leaving the system without important personal documents, deterring employment.

During the 2017 Legislative Session, Texas CASA backed several bills that aimed to effectively assist Texas foster youth in preparing and planning for their transition out of foster care services. SB 1758 makes the following proposals to lessen these and other hardships these children experience before, during, and after this important life transition:

- Amend the Family Code to require that independent living skills assessments be conducted yearly for youth 14 years of age or older, to ensure DFPS is on track in fulfilling its obligation to prepare youth for independent living.
- Expand preparation for adult living to 14-year-olds, in addition to the mandated preparation at age 16, through a standardized Preparing for Adult Living (PAL) Program developed by outside stakeholders.
- Require evidence that DFPS is providing those 16 years or older in care copies of certain important documents, such as a birth certificate and other personal documents.

SB 1220 created a program to allow the Texas Workforce Commission to work with current and former foster youth to build career skills and access career counseling as well as the rest of the services they offer, to help children and youth aging out of foster care pave the path for a successful future.

Looking Forward

Texas CASA has been working with the Department of Public Safety and DFPS to assure that transitioning youth are able to get a driver’s license or state-issued identification card, and to develop better planning for youth who want to stay in extended foster care when they reach 18.

Change Leader: CASA of Denton County

In 2015, CASA of Denton County started studying the needs of teens aging out of foster care and began working closely with two college groups for foster care alumni – Frontiers at Texas Woman’s University, and PUSH (Persevere Until Success Happens) at the University of North Texas. In partnership with the youth, CASA staff, board, and volunteers, the program developed a training curriculum of four sessions that emphasizes the unique needs of teens from 13-18 and older. The curriculum was presented to volunteers for the first time in 2017, and in 2018, the program improved upon the model by using volunteers to present each session with a co-facilitator from the PUSH organization. As the volunteer presents the material, a PUSH member shares personal stories and experiences.
Studies show that trauma can have devastating effects on developing children and youth, causing both short- and long-term problems, including “…difficulties with learning, ongoing behavior problems, impaired relationships and poor social and emotional competence. Children and youth exposed to trauma, especially violence, experience more learning and academic difficulties and behavioral and mood-related problems.”

Once a child is placed in care, friendship and socialization are essential in maintaining health and psychological well-being. A key part of this is access to “normalcy” activities and opportunities. Normalcy activities include spending the night at a friend’s house, volunteering in the community, having an after-school job or playing sports. Although the Texas Department of Family and Protection Services (DFPS) has provided guidelines for normalcy activities, the reality and implementation of these activities into the lives of youth has been inconsistent in the past.

Additionally, there are groups of children who historically have been disproportionately over-represented within the system – facing higher risks of trauma and poor outcomes. According to the DFPS 2018 Disproportionality Analysis report, African American children are substantially more likely to be involved in the child welfare system than white children. They are 1.7 times more likely to be reported for signs of abuse or neglect, 1.9 times more likely to be investigated, and 1.9 times more likely to be removed from their homes.

Youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ) are also overrepresented in the system, many having been abandoned by their families due to their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. According to the Child Welfare Information Gateway, “while approximately 5 to 10 percent of the general population is estimated to be gay, a study conducted in three Midwestern States found that a greater percentage of those aging out of the child welfare system reported a sexual orientation other than heterosexual (24 percent of females and 10 percent of males).” These numbers are also likely underreported since youth who come out as LGBTQ often risk harassment and abuse.

Texas CASA and the CASA network are dedicated to providing the highest quality advocacy for all children and youth within the system. As a network, we are working to address bias and
discrimination on the basis of race, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, disability, or citizenship status. The goal is to give every child the opportunities and resources they need to grow and thrive.

Reducing the Impact of Childhood Trauma

Texas CASA has taken a leadership role in understanding the availability and impact of trauma-informed and mental health services in the Texas child welfare system.

Texas CASA advocates for the understanding that all children and youth in the child welfare system have experienced some level of trauma due to the abuse or neglect by their families. In addition, when children are taken suddenly from their homes and home communities, they often experience feelings of grief, loss and confusion. While there have been previous efforts to establish a trauma-informed child welfare system in Texas, these efforts were slow and disconnected. Texas CASA has taken a leadership role in understanding the availability and impact of trauma-informed and mental health services in the Texas child welfare system.

In 2013, thanks to a two-year grant from The University of Texas at Austin Hogg Foundation for Mental Health, Texas CASA established the Mental Health Task Force – a group comprised of physical and mental health care practitioners, judges, social workers, psychologists, attorneys and state agency personnel who came together to address the variety of mental health issues facing children and youth in the child welfare system. The Task Force met between August 2013 and December 2014 and was charged with:

- Identifying mental health problems experienced by children and youth in state custody,
- Developing actionable solutions (recommendations) to improve the well-being of these children and youth, and
- Advocating for those solutions.

While serving on the Task Force, Texas CASA and the Supreme Court of Texas Permanent Judicial Commission for Children, Youth and Families (the Children’s Commission) recognized the need for a statewide survey on trauma-informed care in the Texas child welfare system. Funded by the Children’s Commission, Texas CASA developed the Workforce Survey on Trauma-Informed Care within the Child Welfare System in Texas.

Change Leader:

Texas CASA

Because of the trauma they have experienced, children in foster care are more likely to be prescribed multiple psychotropic medications at unnecessarily high doses, which can produce staggering side effects. During the 83rd Legislative Session in 2013, Texas CASA helped ensure the passage of HB 915 with the goal of preventing the overmedication of children in care. The bill aimed to increase accountability and awareness for medical consenters and required regular physician visits to monitor the side effects of medication and determine whether its continued use is necessary and appropriate.
The final report, *Understanding Trauma-Informed Care in the Texas Child Welfare System - Data and Recommendations from the Field*, was released in October 2015. Many ongoing challenges were identified from the survey. An overwhelming majority of respondents reported a shortage of adequate trauma-informed services or a lack of knowledge about these services in their area. While most mental and behavioral health providers reported training in one or more of the trauma treatment models, a majority reported that they are neither certified in those models nor using them to fidelity in practice. Another challenge reported was the need for more training, especially in-person, practical and accessible training (in terms of distance, schedule and cost).

After a thorough analysis of the data collected, Texas CASA developed strategic recommendations to help improve the care, services and advocacy that abused, neglected and traumatized children receive, including:

- Gather more information about training and support for kinship caregivers and foster parents;
- Create a standard definition of trauma-informed care to be utilized across state agencies and systems throughout Texas;
- Increase training accessibility and opportunities, especially for populations who have not received any training on trauma;
- Improve and expand existing trauma-informed care training resources and trauma-informed care services throughout Texas; and
- Utilize research on achieving better child outcomes and cost savings to restructure financial contracts with providers.

**Looking Forward**

Texas CASA is continuing to build on the findings from the *Workforce Survey on Trauma-Informed Care within the Child Welfare System in Texas* and is working to ensure that everyone involved in a child’s case receives proper training on identifying, understanding and advocating for the needs of children who have experienced trauma.

Most recently, Texas CASA hired a two-year policy fellow through a grant from the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health. The policy fellow position will work with policy makers to develop legislative proposals aimed at improving mental health and substance use services for families involved in the child welfare system.

Texas CASA believes all adults who work with children in the system must understand the impact of trauma on child development and behavior so that children do not experience additional trauma while in the system. Texas CASA's legislative policy positions for the 2019 86th Legislative Session include the promotion of systematic understanding of trauma and use of trauma-informed care throughout all stages and roles in the child protection system. A trauma-informed system will provide children with the opportunity to heal by building trust and attachment with loving, understanding adults, thereby increasing the opportunity for the positive outcomes they deserve.
Giving Children the Opportunity to “Just Be Kids”

*Texas CASA and the CASA network promote healing and psychological well-being by advocating for more access to trauma-informed care methods and “normalcy” activities.*

To promote healing and well-being, Texas CASA has been training local CASA programs and stakeholders on trauma-informed care methods, specifically Trust-Based Relational Intervention® (TBR®) developed by the Texas Christian University Karyn Purvis Institute of Child Development. Texas CASA first partnered with the late Dr. Karyn Purvis and TCU in 2011 to educate the local CASA programs around the TBR® concept of healing children who have experienced trauma.

In 2014, Texas CASA secured a grant that allowed for local CASA program staff to become certified practitioners of TBR®. In addition to trauma-informed care opportunities at the Texas CASA Annual Conference, a series of TBR® videos developed by TCU were made available to the CASA network online through the Texas CASA Learning Center so that everyone in the network can implement these strategies for the children and youth they serve.

Texas CASA and the CASA network promote psychological well-being by advocating for more access to “normalcy” activities and opportunities. During the 84th Session in 2015, Texas CASA championed Senate Bill 1407 – the so-called “normalcy bill.” Before this bill was passed, children in foster care had to have prior approval from DFPS to do everyday activities that most children would consider normal, like trick-or-treating with friends and sleepovers.

For youth living in foster care placements, a service plan is designed by the foster parent and caseworker to “meet the child’s needs for safety, permanency and well-being while the child is in substitute care,” and includes lists of the activities a child is allowed to participate in while in care. Prior to the passing of SB 1407, if/when foster parents decided to allow children to participate in normal, age-appropriate activities that are not listed on the service plan, Child Care Licensing could potentially reprimand agencies, contractors or foster parents if the child was injured during these activities, even if the parent used a “reasonable and prudent standard” in deciding the appropriateness of the activity. This practice often resulted in foster parents prohibiting the children in their care to participate in activities out of fear of licensing punishments.

**Change Leader:**

**Texas CASA & Care2Rock**

Texas CASA teamed up with Care2Rock, a new virtual music lesson social enterprise, to provide free music lessons to children and youth in foster care. Children in the foster care system often experience multiple foster placements and schools, which means that with each move, they lose connections to key individuals like teachers, peers and band or dance instructors. But with Care2Rock, children get to keep the same teacher everywhere they travel, offering children consistency and the chance to participate in normal childhood activities like music lessons. The partnership will first be piloted with two local CASA programs to ensure that the program is the best it can be, and then, Care2Rock hopes to launch it statewide.
SB 1407 shifts this approval process from the caseworker to the caregiver by empowering foster parents to approve or disapprove a child’s participation in activities based on their own assessment and availability, using a reasonable and prudent parent standard, without prior approval by DFPS. By giving substitute caregivers the power to approve or disapprove a child’s participation in activities, youth are ultimately given more access to normal childhood activities.

Looking Forward
Texas CASA is continuing to work on efforts to expand normalcy for children and youth in state care. CASA is supporting and participating in a Roundtable on normalcy by the Texas Children’s Commission in 2019, and normalcy will be one of the two major subjects explored at the 2019 Texas CASA Child Welfare Primer. Texas CASA is also supporting legislation to amend the Family Code to require discussion of normalcy at all permanency hearings.

Advocating for the Needs of All Children

It is the goal of Texas CASA and the network to provide CASA volunteers that reflect the diversity of the children they serve.

While all CASA volunteers are trained, prepared and equipped to work with any child, the network understands how important it can be for young people to see someone who looks like them, talks like them and can speak with them directly about their experiences.

One strategy Texas CASA implemented to address the need for a more diverse volunteer base is connecting with the diverse, faith-based community of Texas. The Clergy, CASA and Community initiative is a series of facilitated listening sessions designed to learn how we can engage with faith-based organizations to increase local programs’ recruitment efforts and, together, help children in the foster care system. The ultimate goal is to collaborate to design a faith-based recruitment initiative that will foster positive youth development and further enhance connections and support systems within the faith and CASA communities. Texas CASA is currently forming an advisory team comprised of faith-based leaders, key members of the faith community and CASA program staff to work together to create and strengthen strategies to effectively partner with churches’ ministry to serve the children in the foster care system.

Based on the growing overrepresentation of the LGBTQ community in the child welfare system, Texas CASA began addressing any potential bias within our own network. For the past three years, Texas CASA has received the Human Rights Campaign Foundation All Children – All Families (ACAF) Seal of Recognition, one of the first two organizations in Texas to receive this recognition. This seal is awarded to child welfare organizations that demonstrate a commitment to supporting and serving LGBTQ children and youth in care. Texas CASA continues to meet and exceed the criteria each year to maintain its seal of recognition through ongoing training for all staff, statewide leadership, resource development and distribution, and more. The seal directly reflects Texas CASA’s continuing efforts to achieve a safe, positive future for all Texas children and youth.
“Awareness of the situation which foster children are in is what prompted me to volunteer – and because CASA’s efforts are putting a lot of importance on recruiting more diverse volunteers, I was able to connect and bond with children who may face certain obstacles because they are Spanish speakers. My experience has been beyond gratifying.” – Erma Saracho, Volunteer Advocate, Dallas CASA

Looking Forward
Texas CASA is currently developing a new approach to diversity through the LEAD Initiative (Leadership for Equity and Diversity). This initiative will embed equity and diversity work and principles firmly in Texas CASA as an organization and will utilize Texas CASA’s resources to champion these principles throughout the CASA network. The initiative will offer trainings and resources for equity and diversity work to local programs throughout FY 2019 - 2021.

The LEAD Initiative is focused on building key leadership skills for assessing, establishing and growing equity and diversity at CASA organizations. The initiative aims to:

- Increase the quality of advocacy by pairing volunteers with advocate coordinators that are equipped to serve children from a place of cultural competency;
- Address the crisis of disproportionality in the child welfare system;
- Diversify the CASA volunteer pool; and
- Build an educated, mobilized network that is ready to take leadership roles in implementing equity, access and diversity on the individual, organizational and systems level.

The LEAD Initiative assists programs in meeting the standards established by National CASA, which include a required annual in-service training on bias and disproportionality. Also, the LEAD Initiative integrates with the coaching-based training guidebook, e-learning course, and overall coaching model employed in Texas CASA’s other initiatives and programs – assisting programs in shifting from a “managing volunteers” style to a “coaching volunteers” approach in order to improve volunteer retention, satisfaction and effectiveness.
The CASA network plays a vital role in ensuring the safety, permanency, and well-being of children in the child welfare system. Texas CASA is a trusted partner of communities and legislators, and an investment in Texas CASA remains an investment in Texas’ future. Texas CASA will continue to leverage the findings of the Child Outcomes Study to improve and support volunteer advocacy effectiveness.

Texas CASA’s statewide awareness campaign continues to reach more potential volunteers. In conjunction with the campaign, Texas CASA’s Recruitment and Retention team provides hands-on support to local CASA programs. The Recruitment and Retention Officer and Coaches work alongside the local CASA programs to set goals, build relationships within the community, increase volunteer retention, and share best practices, tools, and resources.

Using the National CASA Pre-Service Curriculum, Texas CASA’s Education and Learning team created a Texas-specific curriculum with a guide for volunteers and facilitators. For volunteers, this pre-service training will equip them with the solid base of knowledge needed to powerfully and compassionately advocate for a child that has been abused or neglected. In addition to gaining an understanding of the child protection system and the CASA volunteer role, volunteers learn about trauma and resilience, efforts at improving the network’s systems, cultural competence and much more. For facilitators, the facilitation guide and materials support them in offering the curriculum in a dynamic, energizing, and unforgettable way. The Texas CASA Pre-Service Volunteer Training Curriculum is available online, and regional trainings are being hosted for local CASA program staff so they can have a deeper understanding of the materials.

Through these recruitment and training efforts, the CASA network is empowering more volunteers than ever to be a strong voice for children and youth in the child welfare system.

The momentum the network has created over the last 30 years is only growing stronger. Texas CASA remains committed to developing new and improved ways to enhance the advocacy for children and youth in care. With a dedicated focus on training and recruitment, the CASA eVOLution is moving forward stronger than ever. CASA volunteers are at the heart of the network, and it is Texas CASA’s role to provide the right resources needed to effectively advocate for the safety, permanency, and well-being of children served.
ENDNOTES
