

Court Appointed Special Advocates: Findings

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I conducted my evaluation on the Rappahannock Area CASA. The Rappahannock Area CASA has a small staff to support the volunteers. I chose to interview one member of the staff in order to gain insight into the characteristics of a good volunteer and build upon that information. I also chose to survey the volunteers in an effort to gain constructive feedback on the CASA program through the eyes of the volunteer. Through the survey feedback, the program can be improved by increasing the volunteer's ability to create positive outcomes for the children.

From my interview I obtained information on the process of interviewing prospective volunteers. The CASA policy is that two people should be involved in interviewing prospective volunteers. This could be advisory committee members, board members, and/or staff members. According to my interviewee the typical volunteer is white, upper middle class, and women. The CASA program interviewers attempt to determine the objectivity and flexibility of volunteers by gaining insight into the personal opinion of the volunteer on how they feel about children in abuse situations and parents that abuse their children. An example would be; How do you feel about parents who abuse their children? Could you recommend returning a child to an abusive home? The CASA volunteer coordinators are very up front about the time commitment that they ask of their volunteers. They must commit to serving one year as a CASA representative in order to maintain consistency throughout the trial. The volunteers with the best-case outcomes often put in 10-12 hours a month. This allows for time spent with the child, phone calls, interacting with other members of the team and writing court reports. Family practices of the volunteer is something that is scrutinized quite closely by the staff. Does the volunteer believe in corporal punishment, how were they disciplined as child? They try to determine the attitude of the volunteer, by asking about their family life and how they are raising their own children.

Determining attitudes about abuse and neglect victims is a very important part of the screening process, they are looking for people that can understand the nature of abuse and neglect and then try to work toward the best-case scenario of the child. The volunteers are sometimes presented with problem solving scenarios in an attempt to determine the perspective volunteers' capabilities. By the time the interview process and the training are complete the CASA program is usually left with the most capable volunteers. Most of the volunteers work full time and are still able to meet the time commitments and demands of being a CASA representative.

My survey consisted of seven Likert scale scored questions and four feedback questions. The surveys were targeted toward the CASA volunteers. The respondents were surveyed on the training received by the CASA organization. The follow up questions were included to give relevant background on personal experiences as a CASA volunteer. I received feedback from a total of three surveys. Out of those surveyed 33 percent strongly agree that they feel adequately trained to serve as a CASA volunteer. 100 percent of the respondents feel as though the needs of the volunteer position were explained effectively. 33 percent strongly agree, and 67 percent agree that they feel comfortable with making recommendations about cases. 33 percent strongly agree, and 67 percent agree that they feel prepared to write court reports. 67 percent of respondents feel prepared to testify at court hearings. 100 percent strongly agree they feel that they are making a positive impact on the cases of the children they work with. 100 percent strongly agree that they are provided with adequate knowledge of necessary resources to work a CASA case.

Through my interview I have concluded that the CASA staff members and board have a very rigorous process for selection of CASA volunteers. This has helped them to ensure that they bring in highly capable volunteers. The interview process is one method that CASA uses to weed

out possible ineffective volunteers. They try to ensure that perspective volunteers are aware of the commitments necessary to be an effective volunteer upfront through 35 hours of training. The program does seem to struggle with attracting a diverse group of volunteers which I believe needs to be addressed.

Through my surveys I have concluded that CASA volunteers feel as though they are making a difference in the lives of children. They understand the importance of what they are doing, and they are provided with many resources to help them be successful. There seems to be some room for improvement in the area of making court case recommendations and writing court reports. Through follow up the one that was more unsure about this process has been a volunteer for less than a year.

I believe that my findings can have a positive impact on the program. Although the program meets its planned objectives by bringing in some great volunteers. I believe that it could bring in more volunteers of more diverse backgrounds. This could have a positive impact on the children receiving services in that they may be able to develop more of a connection with their CASA representative. My findings also showed that there is room for improvement in raising the confidence level of new volunteers to make court recommendations. I believe that addressing this issue could help children to have better outcomes through more proactive representation.

I recommend that the CASA staff and board work to increase awareness of their organization in an effort to attract a diverse population. I recommend that they send representatives to community events to advertise their need for volunteers and the service that they provide to children. I also recommend that members with less than a year experience be assigned a volunteer partner with more experience. Even if it is someone who does not have the time to have a case of their own. They can volunteer to be on call for the newly assigned

volunteers. This could help the new volunteer to feel more comfortable and it gives them someone to bounce ideas off of.

Goal number one is to improve the level of diversity amongst CASA volunteers. This can be done through community outreach and more conveniently timed training sessions. Goal number two is to improve the confidence of newly assigned CASA volunteers. This will be done through a buddy volunteer system and an increase focus on confidence in training.

My conclusions are supported by my research articles because the authors argue that greater public and private support would provide more local CASA agencies with the resources to recruit, train, and support more CASA Volunteers (Gershun, 2018). This will help more child victims of abuse and neglect. The articles go into detail about the staggering number of cases of child abuse and neglect. They also discuss CPS and how the family court system operates. One of the main goals that I made was to increase community outreach in order to train and recruit more volunteers and therefore provide better outcomes.

Bibliography

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