

## Information About Becoming a Court Appointed Special Advocate/Guardian ad Litem Volunteer

### **What is a CASA/GAL Volunteer?**

- A Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) or volunteer Guardian ad Litem (GAL) is a specially trained citizen appointed by the Juvenile Court judge to represent a child victim in cases of abuse and neglect.

### **What is the role of a CASA/GAL?**

- A CASA/GAL's role in abuse and neglect proceedings is to present the court with an informed and objective perspective regarding what is in the best interest of the child.

### **What does a CASA do?**

- Once appointed by a juvenile court judge, our CASA/GAL volunteers begin a process of information gathering with the goal of guiding abused children out of the foster care system, identifying the child's needs and ensuring they receive services ranging from psychological treatment, to educational assistance, to parent/family education. Volunteers act as a communications link between the complicated pieces of the child welfare system. CASA/GALs gather all the pertinent information about the child's case and make recommendations to the judge based on that information.

### **How long does a CASA/GAL remain involved on a case?**

- CASA/GAL volunteers are asked to make a commitment to stay with each case they assume until the case closes through reunification with the family, adoption, or "aging out" of the system. In most counties in Washington State, CASA/GALs are not assigned to children 12 years old and under.

### **What training does a CASA/GAL receive?**

- Each CASA/GAL volunteer must complete a comprehensive 32 hour pre-service training. Trainees learn about the child welfare system, how to work with children involved in the system, cultural competence, court report writing and effective advocacy techniques. Professionals from social service agencies, attorneys and judges participate with the CASA/GAL staff to share their expertise.
- Once trained and assigned to a case, volunteers can choose from a range of options to satisfy the 12 hours of continuing education training that are required of advocates annually.

### **Is there a "typical" CASA/GAL volunteer?**

- CASA/GAL volunteers come from all walks of life with a variety of professional, educational, and ethnic backgrounds. Across Washington state, volunteers include working professionals, retirees, writers and editors, students and educators, realtors, health care professionals, mothers, fathers, and grandparents.

### **Who can be a CASA/GAL?**

- No special skills are required—only the desire and commitment to make a difference. Advocates must be 21 years old and are asked for a minimum commitment of two years in order to ensure stability and consistency for the children we serve.

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- The primary requirements for being a CASA/GAL volunteer are that you have a genuine interest in the well-being of children, are a proactive communicator and successfully complete a thorough screening, background check and training process. CASA/GAL volunteers are objective, responsible, committed, and persistent and understand the important role they have in a child's life.

### **How much time is required?**

- In the same amount of time you spend each week doing something ordinary, such as going out to dinner or watching a movie, you can do something extraordinary—change the life of an abused and neglected child.
- Volunteers average 15-20 hours on their case per month. However, cases that are more complex may require more time researching and conducting interviews with involved parties.

### **How does a CASA/GAL research the case?**

- To prepare their recommendations for the court, CASA/GAL volunteers meet with the parents and other family members, social workers, school officials, healthcare professionals, and all others involved in the child's life. Most importantly, CASA/GALs visit with the child(ren) at least once each month in order to gain a full understanding of the situation.

### **How does a CASA/GAL relate to the child(ren) to whom they are assigned?**

- CASA/GAL volunteers offer children a source of stability and trust during complex legal proceedings. They often explain to the child the meaning of the events and the role of all the involved parties. CASA/GAL volunteers also encourage the child to express his or her own opinions, feelings, and hopes, while remaining objective observers.

### **Can a CASA/GAL really make a difference?**

- Research studies have shown that the introduction of just one caring adult in the life of an abused child can change the course of that child's life forever. A court appointed volunteer advocate makes a profound and positive difference for abused children.

### **Why is a CASA/GAL needed?**

- A CASA/GAL volunteer, being assigned to just one or two cases at a time, can focus on gathering all of the pertinent information, meet regularly with the children and report their findings to the judge so that the Court can make an informed decision regarding a child's future. CASA/GALs are trained to investigate the facts, facilitate communication and cooperation, advocate for the child's best interest and monitor the court orders on the case. The driving philosophy behind CASA/GAL is that a child has the right to a permanent, safe home, and volunteers work to challenge the system to formulate a long term permanent plan for each child in a timely manner.