

PREBLE COUNTY COURT APPOINTED SPECIAL ADVOCATE PROGRAM
VOLUNTEER MANUAL

Volunteer Manual

ABOUT THIS HANDBOOK

This handbook provides a general explanation of the Preble County Court Appointed Special Advocate Program policies and procedures as they affect the volunteer advocate.

The handbook is meant to be used as a reference in conjunction with your training manual.

The contents of this handbook are informational only. The handbook is not a contract. The terms of the handbook are subject to change at any time at the sole discretion of the Preble County CASA Program.

DISCLAIMER FOR VOLUNTEER ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Notification

This handbook provides a general explanation of the Preble County Court Appointed Special Advocate Program policies and procedures as they affect volunteers.

The handbook is presented for information purposes and is meant to be used as a reference in conjunction with the volunteer training manual. The policies expressed in this manual do not constitute an employment contract, expressed or implied.

The terms of the handbook are subject to change at any time at the sole discretion of the Preble County CASA Program. Notice of changes affecting volunteer policies will be communicated.

Acknowledgement

I have read and understand to the provisions in this manual.

Signed

Date

ADMINISTRATION

MISSION STATEMENT

GOAL OF THE PROGRAM

PROGRAM OBJECTIVE

ROLE OF CASA TO THE CHILD

PROGRAM TARGET POPULATION

APPOINTMENT/REFERRAL

PREBLE COUNTY CASA PROGRAM

MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the Preble County Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Program is to recruit, train, guide, monitor and maintain volunteer CASAs (Court Appointed Special Advocates) who are appointed by the Judge of the Preble County Juvenile Court as volunteer guardians-ad-litem to represent the best interests of abused, neglected or dependent children in Court.

GOAL OF THE PROGRAM

The goal of the Preble County CASA Program is to provide trained community volunteers to advocate for the best interests of children who come into the Preble County Juvenile Court system as a result of abuse, neglect or dependency.

PROGRAM OBJECTIVE

A CASA volunteer, under the guidance of the Preble County CASA Program Director, fulfill the objective of the Preble County CASA Program of providing advocacy for abused, neglected or dependent children, who are the subject of judicial proceedings, by:

- Conducting an independent investigation concerning each child
- Reporting the findings and making fact-based recommendations to the Court regarding placement (short term and long term), visitation, and services that will serve the child's best interest
- Ensuring representation of the child's best interests in all judicial proceedings and other matters relating to the child
- Monitoring each case until the terms of the Court orders have been fulfilled or the case is dismissed or closed

ROLE OF THE CASA TO THE CHILD

To arrive at an understanding of the CASA role, it is easy to say what we are "not" to a child. We are not Big Brothers or Big Sisters. We are not guardian angels. We are not attorneys speaking for or against the child's wishes or social workers planning for the entire family. We contribute to the "eyes and ears" of the Court, by making independent, objective recommendations regarding the child's best interest.

But what are we in our dealings with children who are now in the juvenile justice system through no fault of their own due to an action by someone who was in their life to protect them? What criteria do we use to determine if our role is appropriate? How involved in their life do we become?

We look to the children and the individual circumstances to guide us. Who are the primary caretakers? What is the involvement of Children Services? Will our actions undermine the role of

the primary caretakers or Children Services? Will we be alert to what extent we may be satisfying our own needs as we carry out our function?

The very fact that you, as CASA, are present for the children shows them that someone else cares. Each situation is unique. The very best we can do for the children is to provide the Court with all relevant information to adequately reflect their best interests.

PROGRAM TARGET POPULATION

The Preble County CASA Program serves children from birth to 18 years of age who have been allegedly abused, neglected, or dependent. Children will be served without discrimination based on a child's age, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, nationality, disability, or religion.

APPOINTMENT/REFERRAL

When Preble County CASA Volunteers have been trained and certified as ready for service, they shall be presented to the Preble County Juvenile Court for swearing in ceremonies, certifying the CASA volunteers as Officers of the Court.

The Preble County CASA Program will be notified by the Court of all child abuse, neglect, and dependency petitions at the earliest possible stage. The Preble County CASA Program will identify an appropriate CASA Volunteer for the child's case and notify the Court. Generally, each CASA volunteer will serve on two cases at a time. An exception may be made for CASA volunteers to serve on more than two cases. If there is no CASA available to take a case, the CASA Director will notify the Juvenile Court as soon as practical so that an attorney Guardian ad Litem may be appointed.

VOLUNTEER ROLE AND FUNCTION

VOLUNTEER ADVOCATE JOB DESCRIPTION

VOLUNTEER QUALIFICATIONS

VOLUNTEER SCREENING

REQUIRED SKILLS/ABILITIES

IMPERMISSABLE CASA ACTIVITIES

MEETING WITH A CHILD

TRANSPORTING A CHILD

VOLUNTEER SELECTION AND APPOINTMENT

VOLUNTEER SUPERVISION

CONDUCT

CONFIDENTIALITY

CASA IDENTIFICATION

VOLUNTEER SAFETY

ENTERING OF HOMES

STATEMENTS TO THE PUBLIC

ACCESS TO VOLUNTEER FILES

ATTIRE

VOLUNTEER ADVOCATE JOB DESCRIPTION

POSITION

Court Appointed Special Advocate / Guardian ad litem (CASA/GAL) volunteer.

REPORTING RELATIONSHIP

Reports to assigned CASA staff.

TIME COMMITMENT

30 hours pre-service training; 12 hours of annual in-service training; other flexible hours as necessary for the assigned case (2-10 hours per month).

POSITION PURPOSE

To serve as a Court Appointed Special Advocate / Guardian ad litem (CASA / GAL) volunteer, working independently to investigate and monitor cases of juvenile abuse, neglect and/or dependent in the Preble County Juvenile Court.

Role and Responsibilities

- Attend screening interview, pre-service and in-service training sessions.
- Serve on at least one case annually by investigating and monitoring the situation while the child is under court jurisdiction.
- Conduct interviews with the child, parent/guardians, relatives, friends, attorneys, teachers, neighbors, foster parents and/or any person with relevant information about the child.
- Review files at appropriate agencies relative to the child's case.
- Have regular and sufficient contact with the child to ensure in-depth knowledge of the case and make fact based recommendations to the court. The CASA/GAL volunteer shall meet in person with the child once every thirty days at a minimum. An exception may be granted at the discretion of the Director; however, the justification and reasons for a decision to permit less frequent in-person contact must be documented.
- Conduct a case conference with the Director as to preliminary findings and to review progress of the case, including permanency plan.
- Maintain and provide to the office, as required, accurate and timely forms and case records, including monthly case updates and court reports.
- Attend all pertinent hearings, reviews and/or meetings to advocate for the child's best interest and provide testimony when necessary.
- Maintain mandated standard of confidentiality on information pertaining to each case.
- Reports any incident of child abuse or neglect, or any situation in which the CASA volunteer has reason to believe that a child is in imminent danger to the Director and appropriate authorities, or otherwise following state legal requirements for mandated reporting.
- Determine if a case/permanency plan has been created for the child.

Volunteer Job Description (Continued)

- Make recommendations for appropriate services for the child, including reasonable efforts, are being provided to the child and the family when appropriate and act as a facilitator among the parties.
- Maintain complete written records about the case, including dates, regarding appointments, interviews, and information gathered about the child, the child's life circumstances, and significant others.
- Assure that the "**child's best interests**" are being represented at every stage of the case, attend court hearings, and provide a signed written report with findings and recommendations to the Court, based on what placement and services are best for the child.
- Participate in any planning or treatment team meetings involving the child, in order to keep informed of progress in the case and to act as the representative of the child's best interests.
- Monitor the case to determine whether the child's needs are being met and whether appropriate action is being taken to fulfill any court orders in a timely manner and that review hearings are held in accordance with the law.
- Inform the court promptly of important developments in the case through appropriate means as determined by court rules.
- Receive direct supervision and guidance from the Director by consulting regularly concerning the assigned case, reviewing progress in the case, and reviewing recommendations and court reports with the Director prior to submitting them to Court. Note: The Director is prohibited from altering reports or recommendations without the knowledge and agreement of the CASA volunteer.
- Remain involved in the case, until formally discharged by the Court.
- Return the entire case file to the CASA office after the case is closed.

VOLUNTEER QUALIFICATIONS

Qualifications

- Must be at least 21 years of age.
- Must successfully pass screening/background check (See screening process).
- Successful completion of 30 hour pre-service training program.
- Attend a minimum of 12 hours in-service hours annually.
- Able to respect and relate to individuals from various backgrounds and cultures in a caring and sensitive manner.
- Good oral/written communication skills.
- Understands and is willing to commit to a one-year volunteer position serving on a minimum of one (1) assigned case.
- Willing to accept supervision, training and evaluation.
- Able to provide own transportation.
- Must be a dedicated child advocate, willing to learn the best possible means to assure that the needs of the children in the Preble County juvenile justice system are being met.

Benefits to the Volunteer

- Ability to impact the life of a child who is in the juvenile justice system as a result of abuse, neglect and/or dependency.
- Opportunity to interact with all facets of the juvenile justice system and its key players.
- Opportunity to gain extensive knowledge about child abuse and neglect and the legal and social service systems in Preble County.
- Increased awareness of educational opportunities (conferences, workshops, etc.) in the child advocacy and juvenile justice arena.
- Opportunity to become part of the growing community of child advocates, assuring that all children who need a CASA / GAL volunteer will have one.

VOLUNTEER SCREENING

To ensure that volunteers accepted into the CASA program are competent and of good character, the Preble County CASA Program carefully screens all volunteer applicants using the following procedures:

- Applicant must submit a written application containing information concerning personal experiences with child abuse and or neglect, educational background, employment, volunteer history and experience working with children.
- The applicant shall participate in a personal interview with CASA staff.
- The applicant must provide three references from persons unrelated to the applicant, preferably one of whom has directly supervised the applicant.
- All volunteers must complete a national, state, and local criminal records check, social security verification, sex offender registry check, motor vehicle and if permissible by law, child protective service check.
- Applicant's name will be provided to the Preble County Department of Job and Family Services and the Preble County Juvenile Court
- Information may be provided by the Preble County Department of Job and Family Services for the purpose of protecting children.

The volunteer applicant will not be accepted into the CASA Program if:

- Convicted of either a felony or misdemeanor which is a sex offense, a crime affecting family relationships, child abuse, or neglect, assault, battery or a crime against public morals or related acts that would pose risks to children or the CASA program's credibility;
- Found to have charges pending for criminal offenses or offenses listed above;
- The applicant refuses to sign a release of information for appropriate law enforcement checks;
- At the discretion of the CASA Program director, the applicant cannot successfully carry out CASA duties and responsibilities.

REQUIRED SKILLS / ABILITIES

The following lists the basic skills and abilities required in order to fulfill your duties and responsibilities as a CASA volunteer:

- Ability to keep all client and Court information confidential
- Ability to communicate effectively both orally and in writing
- Ability to gather and accurately record factual information
- Ability to respect and relate to people from various backgrounds (such as socio-economic, cultural, educational) in a variety of settings
- Ability to maintain objectivity
- Ability to deal with hostility, anger, and other emotional attitudes—your own and others
- A basic understanding of child development
- A basic understanding of family relationships
- Capability of transporting oneself to a variety of locations

IMPERMISSABLE CASA ACTIVITIES

A CASA volunteer should not become inappropriately involved in the case by providing direct service delivery to any parties. This could lead to a conflict of interest, liability issues, or cause a child or family to become dependent on the CASA volunteer for services that should be provided by other agencies or organizations. Examples of inappropriate volunteer practices are:

- Taking a child to the volunteer's home or sheltering a child in that home or any other home other than the child's
- Giving legal advice or therapeutic counseling to a child or family
- Making placement or other arrangements for the child without the consultation and written consent of Children Services
- Giving money or expensive gifts to the child, family, or caregiver

A CASA volunteer should not be related to any parties involved in the case, or be employed in a position and/or agency that might appear to be a conflict of interest, and thereby undermine the value of your information/insights and possibly compromise the basis for final outcome for the child.

MEETING WITH A CHILD

In order to avoid being in a position where someone could make a claim against the CASA volunteer for abuse to the child, the CASA volunteer should meet the child in a public place or with other adults nearby. When speaking to the child alone in a home, the door should remain open or the volunteer and the child should remain within eyesight of the caregivers or other adults.

TRANSPORTING A CHILD

Transporting a child or other party to a case is not a program requirement. If the CASA wishes to transport a child, the following must be completed prior to providing such transportation:

1. Pass a motor vehicles record check;
2. Provide to the program annually a copy of a valid driver's license, and adequate personal automobile insurance that complies with the state minimum;
3. Signs a written statement acknowledging the potential of personal liability and choosing to accept the responsibility;
4. Obtain written permission from the Director; and
5. Obtain written permission from the child's legal guardian or custodial agency.

VOLUNTEER SELECTION

All volunteers accepted into the CASA Program must successfully pass screening and training requirements. Any volunteers who have transferred from another CASA program will have to complete the full application and screening process. The Director has discretion to waive pre-service training requirements for a volunteer transferring from another CASA program.

VOLUNTEER SUPERVISION

The CASA Director is easily accessible to provide guidance to a CASA volunteer. The Director and volunteer will maintain regular contact in order to review progress of the case and promote the child's best interest. Prior to court hearings, including initial adjudication/disposition of the abuse/neglect/dependency case and then at final determination of custody, the CASA volunteer shall email a court report to both the Director and the Juvenile Court Deputy Clerk. While the Director may have edits to the court report, the report shall not be altered without the permission and understanding of the CASA volunteer. When at all possible, the report shall be emailed to the Director and the Juvenile Deputy Clerk at least seven (7) days prior to a dispositional hearing.

CONDUCT

CASAs will encounter a variety of individuals (caseworkers, parents, foster families, etc.) during the course of their investigations. These individuals will be from differing educational and socio-economic backgrounds.

All CASA volunteers are expected to conduct themselves in a professional manner when dealing with others.

It is understood that situations arise which can be frustrating for the volunteer (un-cooperativeness on the part of parents, strongly differing opinions between yourself and the caseworker, frustration over the Court's decisions, etc.) Tears, angry words, outbursts, etc., are never an appropriate response to a difficult situation and usually impedes or impairs the function of the other participants. Displays of emotion are to be contained until such time as the CASA is alone or with office staff. Strive to clearly represent the facts and calmly communicate your interpretation of the situation as you see it. When a situation such as this does occur, CASAs may contact the office staff in order to discuss the situation and the volunteer's feelings.

CONFIDENTIALITY

CASAs are responsible for maintaining confidentiality of all information to which they are exposed while serving as a volunteer, whether this information involves a party to their case, another program case, another volunteer, or staff. Volunteers are not authorized to solicit other persons outside the CASA program to aid them with specific duties outlined in the CASA position description.

A CASA becomes an officer of the court upon assignment to a case. Any information pertaining to the individual families or children that the CASA receives in the discharge of his or her duties is confidential. It may not be discussed with anyone except the following:

- Juvenile Court
- Program Staff
- Children Services employees and agents and service providers assigned to the case
- Other parties to the case and their counsel
- Others outside the agency whose request for access to confidential information are permitted by statute or by the Court

CASAs are required to maintain their so that there is no opportunity for breach of confidentiality. CASAs should return the case file to the CASA office within two weeks of case closure.

CASA IDENTIFICATION

Upon successful completion of the CASA training, all volunteers will be issued a CASA photo identification card. Arrangements for obtaining the identification card will be made by the CASA staff. Upon resignation or dismissal from the CASA program, the identification card is to be returned to the CASA office.

VOLUNTEER SAFETY

No volunteer should feel obligated to put himself or herself in personal jeopardy as he or she performs the role as a CASA. If the volunteer is uneasy about entering a neighborhood, building, or meeting with a particular party, the volunteer should arrange the meeting in a more comfortable location or contact the supervisor for advice.

ENTERING OF HOMES

At no time shall a CASA enter the home of a child when a parent or legal guardian is not present. This applies even when the child would allow access. If a CASA suspects that a child is in the home alone or in danger, the Children Services caseworker should be contacted. Be aware of an individual's sense of privacy. For example, the CASA should not peer into the home window. If a parent is at home but refuses to allow access for the interview, the parent can be told that this will be reflected in the report to the court. This statement may be useful in persuading the parent(s) to allow the CASA access.

STATEMENTS TO THE PUBLIC

In order to maintain the highest level of professionalism, all official statements and public relations inquiries shall be referred to the Director. Any official speaking engagements arranged or conducted by a volunteer shall be vetted first by the Director. The purpose of this policy is to ensure that consistent and approved information is released to the public.

ACCESS TO VOLUNTEER FILES

Volunteers are granted access to their records with approval by and in the presence of the Director. Volunteers may review and make copies of all components of their files with the exception of references which are confidential. If volunteers wish to make additions or corrections to the information contained in their records, the volunteer must: a) discuss the proposed additions/corrections with the Director; and b) provide written explanation for the desired additions/corrections to the Director.

ATTIRE

During the course of carrying out duties, a CASA will be in a variety of settings (parents' homes, meetings with professionals, courtroom, etc.) Open communication of information is a major objective, and as such, attention needs to be given to achieving an environment that is unthreatening, non-judgmental, and without unnecessary distractions, in dress and behavior.

COURTROOM - When attending Court hearings, it is requested that CASAs dress in a business-like manner (e.g.: suit, dress, or dress slacks conducive to the seriousness of the court proceedings).

HOME VISITS - When meeting with parents, foster parents, children, etc., it is suggested that the CASA wear clothing that is both casual and comfortable (e.g. jeans, casual slacks, etc.). Dress and behavior in sharp contrast to the living standards of the environment, may be perceived as judgmental or intimidating. In settings where the home is poorly maintained (unclean, bug infested, etc.), one's "good" clothing is not recommended, for obvious reasons.

MEETINGS - When meeting with professionals involved in the case, dress slacks/dresses are considered to be appropriate.

VOLUNTEER PROCEDURES

TIME COMMITMENT

VACATIONS

TIME SHEETS

RESIGNATION FROM THE CASA PROGRAM

LEAVE OF ABSENCE

VOLUNTEER TERMINATION POLICY

TIME COMMITMENT

Volunteers are requested to commit themselves to the program for a minimum of one year. While every effort will be made to assign cases that fit well with a volunteer's strengths and to value the volunteer's input, volunteers are to be available for case assignment unless:

- There appears to be a conflict of interest with the parties involved
- A serious conflict in values exists between the CASA and an issue relative to the case
- The CASA has informed the Program of a pre-planned vacation or personal commitment
- The CASA cannot participate due to illness
- The CASA has requested a temporary respite from service

Generally, unless a CASA requests to take only one case at a time, a CASA will be assigned to two cases. A CASA may accept appointment of more than two cases at his or her discretion.

VACATIONS

If a CASA plans to be out of town, the CASA office should be notified as soon as possible. Should an emergency occur which will conflict with a scheduled meeting or Court hearing, the CASA staff should be contacted immediately. This allows the staff to appear for the CASA.

TIME SHEETS

Potential funding sources ask CASA to supply the number of hours worked by each volunteer during the preceding calendar year. Hours should include time spent in meetings, in Court hearings, making phone calls, etc. In order to comply with this request, we are requiring that CASAs complete a monthly time sheet.

RESIGNATION FROM THE CASA PROGRAM

It is hoped that once a CASA has been trained, he or she is willing to commit to the program for a period of at least one year or the conclusion of the CASA's first assigned case, whichever is sooner. If at any point in the event a CASA wishes to resign from the Program, it is requested that the CASA complete the following steps:

- Notify the CASA office at least two weeks prior to resignation
- Submit to the office a summary of the case(s) on which they are working. This provides the next person assigned to the case(s) with up-to-date information
- Submit to the office all notes and information relevant to the case(s) (This will ensure the continued confidentiality of the case(s))
- Hand in to the office your CASA identification

Completing the above steps allows the staff to handle the case until such time it can be reassigned.

LEAVE OF ABSENCE

A CASA volunteer may at any time take a leave of absence from the program. It is understandable that sometimes CASA volunteers need to take time off from taking cases. If a CASA volunteer takes a leave of absence of more than 1 year, but less than 5 years, the CASA volunteer must complete the 12 hours of in-service training on a pro-rated basis during the calendar year he or she takes a new case. The CASA must ensure that his or her background checks are up to date. If a CASA volunteer takes a leave of absence for more than 5 years, the volunteer is required to complete the full application process and the 30 hours of pre-service training.

VOLUNTEER TERMINATION POLICY

There may be times when the Director will find it necessary to remove a CASA volunteer from the Program.

Preliminary Actions

If a CASA volunteer's work is unsatisfactory several corrective actions can be made before termination is considered. Preliminary actions taken are within the discretion of the Director:

- ✓ Closer supervision
- ✓ Reassignment to another case
- ✓ Suspension and reenrollment in upcoming training class

Grounds for dismissal will include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Taking action without Program or Court approval which endangers the child(ren) or is outside the role or powers of the CASA program
- Violating a program policy, Court rule, or law
- Failure to complete required ongoing training
- Falsifying information on the volunteer application or misrepresenting facts during the screening process
- Gross misconduct or insubordination
- Being under the influence of alcohol or drugs while performing volunteer duties
- Failure to demonstrate an ability to effectively carry out assigned duties
- Existence of child abuse/neglect allegation against the volunteer
- Conflict of interest arising which cannot be resolved