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Contra Costa County Grand Jury Report 1006

CFS and CASA

Their Common Focus -- Foster Children

**TO: Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors
CASA of Contra Costa County
Contra Costa County Presiding Juvenile Court Judge**

SUMMARY

Each year many abused and neglected children enter the court's juvenile dependency and foster care system. These children are in need of consistent, reliable and continuous adult relationships in their lives. Contra Costa County Children and Family Services (CFS) is responsible for providing these children with an array of services, many of which require professionals with specialized training, such as mental health, medical and social services. The Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) organization is a vital element in assisting CFS to meet the needs of foster care children in Contra Costa County.

CASA is an organization that provides a foster child with a volunteer adult advocate who stays in continuous touch with the child, assessing living arrangements, education, **medical and emotional needs**. Together CFS and CASA support the child and the Juvenile Court as it oversees the **well-being of the child**. Therefore, it is important to underscore the critical need for CASA as a partner with CFS in the care of **abused and neglected children in Contra Costa County**. Both organizations must find ways to improve their partnership of service on behalf of foster children.

BACKGROUND

Recent county budget cuts have reduced staff and adversely affected CFS' ability to serve foster children. One hundred nineteen (119) positions throughout the department were eliminated in the budget year 2008-2009, sixty-five of which were social workers responsible for children in **foster care**. Each social worker is now responsible for coordinating a variety of support services for more than 20 children and their families.

CASA arose from a Juvenile Court Judge's dire need for more information about the children appearing before him. The enormous number of CFS cases filed in Juvenile Court and dwindling resources to investigate them often compelled judges to make placement decisions based on less than complete and objective information.

CASA's commitment is to ensure "effective networking with the Contra Costa County Juvenile Court, the Children and Family Services Department, the Child Abuse Prevention Council and other agencies". It operates under the authority of and in accordance with guidelines established by the Judicial Council as outlined in the California State Welfare and Institutions Code and in Rule 5.655 of the California Rules of Court.

Largely due to a CFS social worker's caseload, his or her contact with any one of the children for whom he or she is responsible may be limited or irregular. One of a CASA volunteer's primary roles is to maintain ongoing communication with the child and all parties involved in the child's life and to provide written reports to the court. Often the CASA volunteer is the only continuous, consistent and reliable adult relationship in the child's life. A trained and sworn CASA volunteer is assigned by the court to advocate for an individual child and in some cases siblings. A decline in donations due in part to the economic downturn of the last two years has forced CASA to reduce its level of service.

METHODOLOGY

In September of 2009, the Grand Jury began its review of the services provided to Contra Costa County children in foster care with a focus on the relationship of CFS and CASA. The following documents were reviewed:

- California state statutes and Rules of Court
- 2009 Final Report and Action Plan of the California Blue Ribbon Commission on Children in Foster Care

The Grand Jury interviewed:

- Children and Family Services personnel
- Juvenile Court personnel
- Members of the CASA staff and volunteers

The Grand Jury:

- Observed juvenile court proceedings
- Reviewed CASA training materials
- Attended an orientation for prospective CASA volunteers
- Analyzed demographic data for CFS and CASA

NARRATIVE

CASA volunteers must complete 30 hours of formal instruction and training, a substantial part of which is provided by CFS.

As with CFS, CASA is governed by the Rules of Court which specify stringent requirements for confidentiality. Volunteers are prohibited from providing case information to anyone other than the court, CFS, the parties involved, their attorneys and CASA staff. Both CFS and the Juvenile Court may request CASA volunteers. Not all foster children are assigned a CASA volunteer. The court decides whether a CASA volunteer is appointed based upon a child's particular circumstances.

A volunteer is assigned to cases in accordance with a court order and through procedures approved by the Presiding Juvenile Court Judge. At any given time there are approximately 50 children on the waiting list for a CASA volunteer.

The CASA volunteer makes a commitment to a child for a minimum of two years. He or she donates an average of twenty hours per month to:

- Contact the child every 7 to 10 days
- Maintain communication with CFS and service providers
- Determine appropriateness of living arrangements
- Advocate for the child's educational, medical, and emotional needs
- Testify in court on the child's behalf and submit court reports

FINDINGS:

1. In 2008-2009, there were approximately 1,100 foster care children served by CFS.
2. In 2008-2009, 179 of the foster care children in CFS were being served by 157 trained CASA volunteers.
3. Approximately 50 children are on a waiting list for a CASA volunteer assignment.
4. In 2008-2009, of the 119 positions eliminated in CFS, 65 were social workers responsible for foster children.
5. In the same year, CASA volunteers provided 20,477 case hours of advocacy services to foster care children of Contra Costa County.
6. At least forty-six (46) new CASA volunteers must be recruited, selected and trained each year to maintain the current level of volunteer services.

7. The Fall 2009 CASA training cycle was eliminated due to budgetary constraints.
8. In 2008-2009, approximately 70% of foster children in CFS assigned to a CASA volunteer were Latino or children of color.
9. Representatives of CFS and CASA staff expressed the need for more ethnically diverse volunteers since 80% of CASA volunteers are Caucasian.
10. Of the foster care children served by CASA, 55% are from East and West County while only 16% of CASA volunteers are from East and West County.
11. Representatives of CFS and CASA suggested that team effectiveness can be improved by addressing the differences in understanding or appreciation of their respective roles and responsibilities.
12. CFS can be instrumental in supporting additional training of CASA volunteers in the areas of juvenile court procedures, dependency law and standards of care.

CONCLUSIONS:

Foster care children reap the benefit when CFS and CASA work effectively as a team. CFS is responsible for providing these children with an array of services, many of which require professionals with specialized training, such as mental health, medical and social services. CASA pairs a foster child with a volunteer adult who continuously advocates for the child's needs, assessing living arrangements, education, medical and emotional needs. Together CFS and CASA support the child and the Juvenile Court as it oversees the well-being of the child. CFS and CASA can take steps to improve their working relationship and effectiveness.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. CFS shall assist CASA in its recruitment efforts to broaden the diversity of its volunteers' ethnicity and gender.
2. CFS shall assist CASA in expanding recruitment and orientation sessions into East and West County.
3. CFS and CASA shall explore methods for improving their team effectiveness.
4. CFS shall support additional CASA volunteer training in the areas of juvenile court procedures, dependency law and standards of care.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Findings

Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors: 1 through 12

Recommendations

Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors: 1 through 4