

THE STATE OF TEXAS §
 §
COUNTY OF TARRANT §

AGREEMENT

WHEREAS, **COURT APPOINTED SPECIAL ADVOCATES OF TARRANT COUNTY, INC.** provides trained, court-appointed volunteers to assist the family law courts of Tarrant County by assisting court-appointed attorneys ad-litem and advocating the best interests of the child in child abuse matters and whereas such services include investigating circumstances pertaining to the welfare of such children pursuant to the court's function of providing placement for such children that are in need of alternative environments;

WHEREAS, pursuant to §81.027 of the Texas Local Government Code, the Tarrant County Commissioners Court may provide for the support of paupers and residents of Tarrant County who are unable to support themselves;

WHEREAS, The Tarrant County Commissioners Court hereby finds that the programs and efforts of **COURT APPOINTED SPECIAL ADVOCATES OF TARRANT COUNTY, INC.** benefit the citizens of Tarrant County, particularly children in need of such services; and

NOW, THEREFORE, this **Agreement** is made and entered into this ____ day of _____, 2024, by and between **COURT APPOINTED SPECIAL ADVOCATES OF TARRANT COUNTY, INC. ("CASA")**, acting by and through its duly authorized agent, and **TARRANT COUNTY, TEXAS ("COUNTY")**, acting by and through its County Judge.

CASA and the **COUNTY** agree as follows:

1. **CASA** agrees to continue providing such services already being provided by such organization to the courts and the children of Tarrant County.
2. **COUNTY**, for and in consideration of the services provided, agrees to pay to **CASA** a lump sum payment of TWENTY-FIVE THOUSAND AND NO/100 DOLLARS (\$25,000.00) for services rendered to the residents of Tarrant County, Texas for the fiscal year beginning October 1, 2023 and ending September 30, 2024.
3. **TO THE EXTENT ALLOWED BY TEXAS LAW, CASA HEREBY AGREES TO INDEMNIFY AND HOLD HARMLESS COUNTY, ITS OFFICERS, AGENTS, OFFICIALS, AND EMPLOYEES FROM ANY LOSS, DAMAGE, INJURY OR CLAIM ARISING FROM THE NEGLIGENT OPERATION OF ITS PROGRAM. SAID INDEMNIFICATION WILL INCLUDE, BUT NOT BE LIMITED TO, ALL AMOUNTS OF ALL CLAIMS, ATTORNEYS' FEES, AND COSTS OF COURT.**

4. Nothing contained in this **Agreement** shall be deemed or construed by the parties hereto, nor by any third party, as creating the relationship of principal and agent, partnership, joint enterprise, common enterprise, joint venture, joint owners, or joint tenants between the parties. The parties hereby declare and acknowledge that the relationship existing is one of independent contractor. This **Agreement** does not and shall not be construed to entitle either party or any of their respective employees or officials, if applicable, to any benefit, privilege or other amenities of employment from the other party.

5. This **Agreement** shall not be interpreted to inure to the benefit of a third party not a party to this **Agreement**. This **Agreement** may not be interpreted to waive any statutory or common law defense, immunity, including governmental and sovereign immunity, or any limitation of liability, responsibility, or damage of any party to this **Agreement**, party's agent, or party's employee, otherwise provided by law.

6. The parties to this **Agreement** will not sell, assign, transfer or convey any benefits or obligations of this **Agreement** in whole or part without the prior written consent of both parties.

7. If any one or more of the provisions contained in this **Agreement**, for any reason, be held to be invalid, illegal or unenforceable in any respect, such invalidity, illegality or unenforceability will not affect any other provision of this **Agreement**.

8. This **Agreement** constitutes the entire agreement between the parties, and any and all prior negotiations are merged into this **Agreement**. Any amendment, change, or addition to this **Agreement** shall be made only in writing and signed by both parties.

9. This **Agreement** will be governed by and construed according to the laws of the State of Texas. Venue for any action or claim arising from this **Agreement** will be in Tarrant County, Texas, as to state court actions, and the United States District Court for the Northern District of Texas, as to federal court actions.

10. In providing the services required by this **Agreement**, **CASA** must observe and comply with all applicable federal, state, and local statutes, ordinances, rules, and regulations, including, without limitation, workers' compensation laws, minimum and maximum salary and wage statutes and regulations, and non-discrimination laws and regulations. **CASA** shall be responsible for ensuring its compliance with any laws and regulations applicable to its business, including maintaining any necessary licenses and permits.

11. **CASA** agrees to provide **COUNTY** all records relating to the programs performed by **CASA** upon written request of **COUNTY** and to provide a final report detailing the manner in which such funds are expended and the program details of its services.

12. **CASA** must submit to **COUNTY** a final report as to the program outcomes achieved within sixty (60) days of the end of the requested funding year [by November 30, 2024] by providing the following:

- (a) a program update on all outcomes accomplished and client populations served; and,
- (b) an accounting of all expenditures of **COUNTY** funds (salary, rent, training, etc.). *Any funds not used for the specified purposes or not used within the time limits specified in this contract are subject to be returned to **COUNTY**.*

Until receipt of this final report by **COUNTY**, all subsequent funding will be held in abeyance.

13. **CASA** verifies that it does not boycott Israel and will not boycott Israel during the term of this contract. The term "boycott Israel" is as defined by Texas Government Code Section 808.001, effective September 1, 2017.

14. **CASA** acknowledges and agrees that it has fully, accurately, and completely disclosed all interested parties in the attached Form 1295, and has acknowledged the completeness of this disclosure by filing the Form 1295, attached as Exhibit A, with the Texas Ethics Commission as required by law.

SIGNED AND EXECUTED this _____ day of _____, 2024.



**AUTHORIZED AGENT
 COURT APPOINTED SPECIAL ADVOCATES
 OF TARRANT COUNTY, INC.**

**COUNTY OF TARRANT
 STATE OF TEXAS**

 Tim O'Hare
 County Judge
 Tarrant County Commissioners Court

APPROVED AS TO FORM:

CERTIFICATION OF
 AVAILABLE FUNDS: \$25,000.00

Criminal District Attorney's Office*

Tarrant County Auditor

*By law, the Criminal District Attorney's Office may only approve contracts for its clients. We

reviewed this document as to form from our client's legal perspective. Other parties may not rely on this approval. Instead those parties should seek contract review from independent counsel.



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Final Report FY 2022 - 2023

Organization Name: CASA of Tarrant County
Evaluation submitted by: Catelyn Devlin, Director of Grants & Contracts
Contact phone number: 817-877-5891 office; 479-871-3416 cell (preferred)
Amount Received: \$20,000.00
Grant period: October 1, 2022 to September 30, 2023

Project funds were used for:

Funds were used to cover 31% of one full-time CASA Child Advocacy Specialist, specifically in covering \$15,3338.45 in salary and \$4,661.55 in fringe expenses. Each Child Advocacy Specialist is responsible for up to 30 volunteers, and ensures their volunteer including monthly contact with CPS worker, eyr e v i ad litem, monthly visit to the foster home, monthly observed CPS visit, and contact with teachers, school counselors, therapist and/or daycare. Child Advocacy Specialists also attend all court hearings with their volunteers and provide support and mentoring as the volunteers navigate the legal process of the family court system.

Due to your generosity of the Tarrant County Commissioners Court, CASA of Tarrant County can proudly report the following statistics (and new agency records) from October 1, 2022 to September 30, 2023:

- 953 abused and neglected children served with a CASA volunteer, including 559 cases of children
- 118 new CASA volunteers completed 30 hours of pre-service training and took their first case assignment
- 511 CASA volunteers served children in foster care in Tarrant County

In DFPS fiscal year 2022 (September 2021 through August 2022), 5,506 children were confirmed victims of child abuse and neglect in Tarrant County, 555 of whom were removed from their homes and placed in foster care. This is a decrease from the 663 children who were removed in DFPS FY2020.2021, but we estimate part of this change is due to the higher than average removals between September 2020 and December 2020 associated with COVID and schools reopening. We also saw lower than average removals between September 2021 and December 2021, possibly in association with the Child Tax Credit which has been shown to lower child abuse removals or with changes to the definitions to child neglect, which is in association with a statewide reduction in child neglect removals beginning in September 2021.

This combination of removals outside the average in fall 2020 and fall 2021 may be largely responsible for the significant change between DFPS FY20.21 year (January through December), CASA estimates there were 527 children removed from their homes January – December 2021 and 565 children removed between January and December 2022, representing a 7% increase in removals in 2022 compared to 2021.



In 2022, Tarrant County also had the highest per capita child abuse rate of all urban areas in Texas at 10.04 abused children for every 1,000 children, compared to a rate of 7.83 children in Dallas, 4.11 in Harris, 4.14 in Collin, and 5.02 in Denton counties (DFPS, 2023). Tarrant County we know what happens when they don't have someone to help them as a result of abuse or neglect in Tarrant County (Office of Child Safety, 2023).

Despite these challenges, your generosity is providing the stability and care vulnerable children in our community need to grow and thrive. With your support, CASA of Tarrant County served 1,098 children with 579 volunteer advocates in 2022, and we are on track to serve an estimated 1,000 children with 550 volunteer advocates in 2023. Your commitment to our community enables CASA to serve foster children from all races, ethnic groups, socioeconomic classes, genders, and geographic areas of Tarrant County, ages birth to age 21.

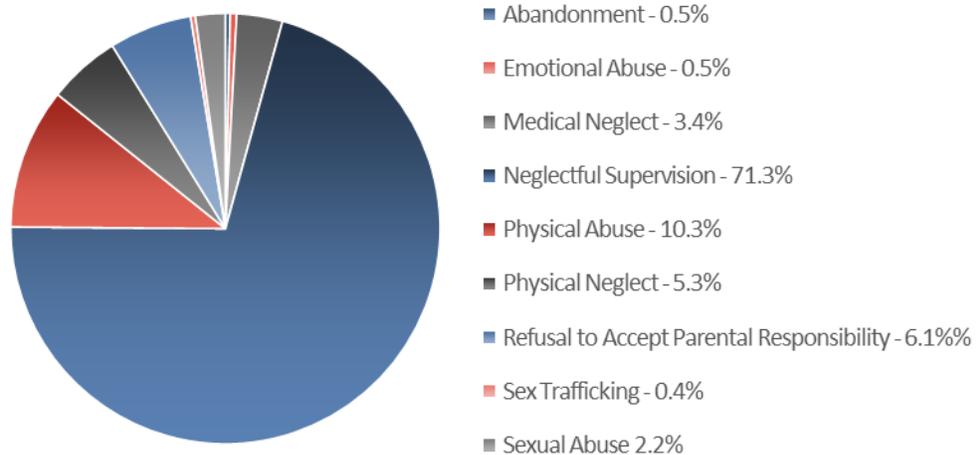
1:1 Ages of Children Served in 2022 (n = 1,098)		
0 – 5 years old	477	43.4%
6 – 11 years old	318	29.0%
12 – 17 years old	262	23.9%
18 – 21 years old	41	3.7%

While we are still waiting to finalize 2023 data, we know that in 2022, an estimated 589 children were removed from their homes due to the following sustained/substantiated allegations: 71.3% experienced neglectful supervision, 10.3% physical abuse, 2.2% sexual abuse, 10.3% physical neglect, 3.4% medical neglect, 6.6% some form of abandonment, 0.5% emotional abuse, and 0.4% sex trafficking. Child abuse and neglect creates toxic impacts on a child's development. Children in foster care have some type of disability compared to 10% of children not in foster care¹. Compared to the average population, children in foster care are twice as likely to have learning disabilities and developmental delays, three times as likely to have ADD/ADHD, hearing, and vision problems, five times as likely to have anxiety, and seven times as likely to have depression².

¹ Barrat & Berliner, 2013
² Turney & Wildeman, 2016



Types of Child Abuse/Neglect in Tarrant County in 2022



Description of the Need for CASA

Child abuse and neglect, and the challenges of foster care awaiting children who are removed from their homes, make visible impacts in children. For decades, we have known that child abuse and neglect put a child on a trajectory for an adulthood saturated by poor medical and mental health, poor educational performance, higher incarceration rates, teenage pregnancy, homelessness, substance abuse, poor workforce performance, and increased chances of repeating the same cycle of child abuse in future generations as adult perpetrators³.

Removing a child from an abusive and neglectful home does not end their suffering. During their time in foster care, children are separated from their family and the only life they used to know: their teachers, friends, aunts, uncles, and grandparents, and for 36% of Tarrant County children, they are even separated from their siblings¹.

The pain and challenges of foster care can be lifelong: in 2016 the American Academy of Pediatrics found that foster children experience the worst physical and mental health outcomes of all children and have a life expectancy of only 60 years⁴. The more unstable their time in foster care, as marked by multiple placements in different foster homes and the overall length of time they spend in care, the more likely they are to experience poor physical and mental health outcomes. While children in foster care are supposed to only be in foster care for 12 to 18 months, (Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997), in 2022, Tarrant County foster youth spent on average 21 months in foster care¹.

³ Anda, Felitti, Bremner, Walker, Whitfield, Perry, Dube, Giles, 2006; Dube, Miller, Brown, Giles, Felitti, Dong, & Anda, 2006

⁴ Turney & Wildeman, 2016



However, children sometimes do not find permanent families until they become adults: they spend their childhoods in foster care and turn 18 years old having never found a permanent family or home. 10% of all the Tarrant County children who left foster care in 2022 aged out. On average, they spent 42 months – nearly four years of their childhood – in foster care. Youth who aged out experienced 7.1 different foster home placements in 2022, none of which resulted in a permanent home¹. They cost taxpayers \$300,000 each over their lifetimes in associated criminal justice, public health, and low work performance costs⁵. Tarrant County children, especially those at-risk of aging out, also have an alarmingly high runaway rate. Running away puts foster children at a high-risk for human trafficking: **86% of trafficking victims in Texas have prior CPS involvement**⁶. For the 70 Tarrant County youth who aged out in 2022, they will cost taxpayers an estimated total of \$21 million over their lifetimes, aged out in 2022.

Systemic challenges of foster care create pervasive instability, largely with children frequently changing their foster homes or group homes. Typically each new foster home placement comes with a school change, and every time they change schools, children tend to fall 4-6 months behind academically, resulting in not months but years of schooling lost by the time they leave foster care⁷. This has severe outcomes: **only 50% of children who have ever been in foster care are expected to graduate high school**⁸. Homeless children are more likely to graduate high school than foster children⁹. These children are also more likely to drop out of school, experience homelessness, or end up in jail¹⁰. In fact, close to half of all children who age-out of foster care are in jail by the time they are 23¹¹.

Every abused and neglected child in Tarrant County is at-risk for the above outcomes.

There are services available to help prevent and mitigate these outcomes. Yet within an overburdened child welfare system, children often miss early childhood interventions, physical therapy, medical care, and counseling needed to prevent long-term harm¹². Even when children do receive educational and mental health assessments, one recent study showed up to 84% foster children whose testing showed needed mental health and 2 months of care after testing¹³. COVID-19 has created additional barriers and delays in accessing important services for children and families, and without advocacy, many of these requests for services are getting lost in an overburdened system.

This is our problem, affecting not only each child but every one of us as community members. Between medical costs, mental health care, lower academic achievement, lost work productivity, child abuse and

⁵ Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2013

⁶ Fort Worth Police Department (FWPD), 2018

⁷ Legal Center for Foster Care & Education, 2008

⁸ Kovan, et. al., 2014; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2010

⁹ Clemens, 2014

¹⁰ Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2013; Rebbe, Nurius, Ahrens, & Courtney, 2017

¹¹ Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010

¹² Ward, et al., 2009

¹³ Petrenko, Culhane, Garrido, Taussig, 2011



neglect cost the U.S. \$124 billion every year¹⁴. With a waiting list of 463 children, more advocates are needed to connect children and families to critical services and to add urgency to cases, making sure children do not suffer needless delays and spend more time in foster care, away from family and security, any longer than is necessary.

Description of CASA Program Services

CASA of Tarrant County is a volunteer-powered agency advocating for the safety, permanency, and recovery of abused and neglected children. CASA recruits, trains, and supervises community members to become volunteer advocates for children during their time in foster care. By forming a relationship with the child and the adult(s) in their life, CASA strengthens. They help the child obtain therapeutic services the child needs to heal from their abuse while engaging and empowering tThroughout the legal court case, the CASA volunteer assesses if it would be in the child's relative, or be made available for adoption. The CASA then provides the judge with a recommendation regarding what kind of permanent home would be in the child's best interest. By volunteering 15 inter hours a month throughout the child's case, CASA is one of the most consistent sources of support and stability for the child during their difficult and uncertain time in care, and they advocate that all decisions are made to meet the needs of the whole child by focusing on the child's:

– Safety –

Safety is not a guarantee for children in foster care. Multiple studies¹⁵ show approximately a third of foster youth experience additional abuse or neglect while in foster care, but a CASA intervenes to change that outcome. A recent study showed Texas children with a CASA volunteer are 39% less likely to experience abuse or neglect while in foster care, partly due to volunteers visiting the children so frequently¹⁶. With only one case, CASA volunteers are able to see their children more often than caseworkers, allowing CASA advocates to assess safety frequently and support caseworkers in the overall protection of Tarrant County. Judges also rely on the facts gathered by CASA volunteers to determine if it is safe for the child to return to the home they were removed from, and by presenting needed details about the child's wellbeing and able to make the best safety support. & O u s i o n s c e s s w h i c h d cases has increased significantly by incorporating partners from agencies such as CASA of Tarrant County. Associate Judge Ellen Smith of the 323rd District Court¹⁷, *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, 2016. Not only are children with CASA volunteers less likely to re-enter foster care – their parents are more likely to receive services like parenting classes, substance abuse treatment, counseling, and legal services

¹⁴ Fang, Brown, Florence, & Mercy, 2012
¹⁵ Pecora et al., 2005; Children's Rights, Inc. 2005
¹⁶ Osborne, Warner-Doe, & Lawson, 2019
¹⁷ Smith, E. 2016, Star-Telegram



- all needed to fully address whatever led to the initial child abuse and neglect and ensure the child is in a safe home during and after their time in foster care¹⁸.

– Permanency –

When a child's safety-term solutions are the driving force in deciding what is best for the child. From the first time they meet the child, CASA volunteers are assessing what is the best and most sustainable long-term solution for vulnerable children. CASA volunteers do not settle for short-term solutions: they work to ensure the child has stability today and tomorrow so the child can develop and thrive. CASA volunteers help judges make decisions: should the child be returned to their parents, placed with relatives, or adopted? CASAs are uniquely suited to the role of permanency and long-term planning: due to their independent nature and commitment to serving the child's best interests above all, a CASA volunteer child and knows how the child¹³. To determine this, CASA volunteers get to know the child and the child's connected and involved while the child they care about is in foster care. Research shows when foster children have better social support, they also see improvements with their educational, medical, and mental health outcomes and declines in behavioral problems, crime, and poverty rates¹⁹. Having more positive relationships also decreases the abuse when they become a parent²⁰, effectively breaking the cycle of abuse and neglect.

– Recovery –

By moving the conversation beyond safety and helping the child access all services needed to heal from their abuse, CASA advocates for the whole child. Studies show that children who have a CASA volunteer are more likely to receive therapeutic services and have better educational outcomes than children without an advocate. The high-quality advocacy CASA provides changes outcomes for abused and neglected children, helping change the trajectory for the century science to the child welfare system by ensuring staff and volunteers are trained in the latest trauma-informed interventions for abused and neglected children. By providing the knowledge and framework needed to understand and heal developmental trajectory, hurts CASA volunteers advocate that the child receive the proper therapy and placements needed to help the child heal. By creating a best interest determination encompassing safety, permanency, and recovery, CASA of Tarrant County helps our community's children tomorrow.

¹⁸ U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), 2006

¹⁹ Herrera, DuBois, Kilpatrick, Johnson & Mulford, 2010; Murayama, Fujiwara, & Kawachi, 2012; Ehsan & Silva, 2015; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000; Turley, Gamoran, McCarty, & Fish, 2017; Moore & Recker, 2016.

²⁰ Fujiwara, Yamaoka, & Kawachi, 2016



When children are provided a CASA volunteer, children are not only given the crucial advocacy that can make a difference for their immediate safety and long-term permanency; they also receive an evidence-informed service to improve their lives holistically. The increased access to community services, a greater likelihood of permanency, and better school outcomes all help mitigate the trauma and long-term consequences of abuse and neglect. CASA of Tarrant County believes every foster child deserves access to this service, and with support from Tarrant County, CASA can serve as many children as possible in 2024 and make sure they don't have to face foster

The Benefits of CASA Advocacy for Children, Families, and the Tarrant County Community-at-large

CASA of Tarrant County provides an unduplicated and evidence-informed advocacy service. By addressing the child's needs holistically, CASA and neglect while providing needed stability to minimize the stress of foster care. While some studies show CASA programs result in children being more likely to be adopted, less likely to find a permanent home, and more likely to spend more time in foster care²¹, we do things differently in Tarrant County. Specifically in Tarrant County, children who are given a CASA volunteer are *more likely* to find a permanent home and to be reunified with family

While we won't have 2023 data, of the 337 Tarrant County children who had a CASA volunteer and left foster care in 2022, 95% found a permanent family when they left foster care and 79% were kept with their families through reunification with parents or placement with relatives.

- 39% were reunified with their parents
- 40% were placed with family or family friends
- 16% were adopted
- 4.8% aged-out of foster care, or turned 18 without having found a permanent family. This is not considered a permanent outcome for children in foster care.

Unfortunately, not every child had a CASA in 2022. Of the estimated 172 Tarrant County children *who didn't have a CASA volunteer* when they left foster care last year, only 85% of them found a permanent home and 57% were kept with their families through reunification or relative placements.

- 33% were reunified with their parents
- 24% were placed with family or family friends
- 29% were adopted
- 15% aged out of foster care

Thanks to your longstanding generosity, most children in Tarrant County had a CASA volunteer in 2022. Of the estimated 1,652 children in need of a CASA in 2022, CASA served 65% of them by providing

²¹ Osborne, Warner-Doe, LeClear, & Sexton, 2019



advocates to 1,098 children. Because of your generosity, children who had a CASA volunteer were more likely to find a permanent home than children without a CASA, right here in Tarrant County.

For the children who left foster care, not only were they more likely to find a permanent home if they had a CASA, they also spent less time in foster care. In 2022, the median length of time Tarrant County children spent in foster care was 17.5 months for children with CASAs and 18.5 months for children without CASAs. **This saves children a month of uncertainty and instability and saves taxpayers \$1,631,847 in daily foster care reimbursements alone²².**

When a child is away from her home and missing her family, her room, her teacher, her siblings, her pet, and her caregivers, ~~One month, four weeks, or 30 days is a long time for a~~ ~~three-year-old child who is waiting in uncertainty, not knowing who her permanent family will be.~~ ~~With your support, CASA adds urgency to every child's~~ and family members to find permanent homes for every child served.

These permanency outcomes are intentional. Since 2017, CASA has used the research-based intervention **Collaborative Family Engagement (CFE)** to generate the best permanency outcomes for children in foster care. CFE has CASA volunteers engage family members and friends soon after the child is removed to expedite finding a permanent solution and capitalize on the urgency surrounding a recent removal. A CASA volunteer's goal is to empower children leave foster care, and specific CFE tools and meetings are held to identify, locate, and engage family members and maintain their involvement. Families often feel more comfortable working with unpaid, independent CASA volunteers than they do with CPS or other government agencies, and between this collaboration and the strategic CFE engagement work of the CASA volunteer, the results are visible.

What appears to be simple interventions can have large effects: by advocating for minimal placements, CASA improves life outcomes to be felt for years to come. Research shows children who had one fewer placement per year were almost twice as likely to graduate from high school before leaving foster care and are more likely to graduate from college²³.

CASA believes all children have the ability to heal from their abuse and that permanency can be found for every child. Since those can often be difficult feats, every abused and neglected child in Tarrant County needs someone advocating for their safety, permanency, and recovery. ~~Without an advocate~~ ~~and independent assessment of the child's best~~ unsafe home or to have crucial family connections severed unnecessarily. Your support is critical to bringing these lasting solutions to abused and neglected children in 2024.

Program Partners

²² Based on the Tarrant County daily rate of \$49.54 for foster homes through child placing agencies

²³ Pecora, et al., 2009



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Governmental Partners: CASA of Tarrant County is court-appointed to Child Protective Service cases and provides unduplicated advocacy services in Tarrant County. CASA of Tarrant County maintains Cooperative Working Agreements with Child Protective Services, Family Recovery Court (formerly Family Drug Court), and the 231st, 233rd, 322nd, 323rd, 324th, 325th, and 360th District Courts.

Nonprofit/Social Service Partners: CASA works collaboratively with major child welfare agencies in Tarrant County, including ACH Child and Family Services, Our Community Our Kids (OCOK – foster care placement agencies), Alliance for Children (Child Advocacy Center), and MHMR through quarterly Mental Health Connections, Safe Babies, and TRAC (aging out) meetings. To help ensure wraparound service delivery for foster children, CASA also maintains partnerships with the Parenting Center, The Women’s Center, Cook Children’s Hospital, Merritt Family Safe Home Services, Covenant Kids Behavioral, Shaken Baby Alliance, Divinity Family Services, Juvenile Probation, and the Recovery Resource Council.

The eyes of Texas are on Tarrant County, as Our Community Our Kids (OCOK) rolled out a new foster care model in March 2020 called Community Based Care (CBC). This model is designed to keep children placed more closely to home and privatizes the ongoing case management of children while they were in foster care, which used to be handled by the state of Texas. As OCOK manages the new Community Based Care program, they have stated CASA is a critical piece to a successful implementation of this new program in providing stability and consistency for the family to new case managers.

CASA of Tarrant County is also creating the model for other CASA programs in Texas to use as the Community Based Care model is expected to be replicated out through other counties in the coming years. CASA of Tarrant County has provided consultations and trainings on Community Based Care transitions and collaborations to other CASA programs, including Dallas CASA, CASA of Denton County, CASA of Collin County, CASA programs surrounding Bexar County, and CASA of Tarrant County has presented on state-wide calls regarding the implementation of Community Based Care and how other CASA programs can prepare to meet their communities needs during their upcoming transitions.

Over the last few years, CASA and OCOK have worked together to create innovative programs to start solving some of the seemingly unending challenges seen in child welfare. When there was a shortage of foster care beds in 2020, CASA and OCOK, along with the Tarrant County Sheriff’s Office (TCSO), Detective Blain, and Tarrant County OCOK’s Senior Director of Care Management and Prevention, created the Intensive Family Finding Project, which placed eligible children with relatives and completed home studies within 90 days in order to open up more foster care beds. Within four months, 33% of IFFP children were placed with relatives and another 39% were waiting to be placed after a completed home study. The IFFP pilot was a success, and CASA has used five years of data showing 94-95% of Tarrant County children find a permanent home when they leave foster care. In 2021, 81% of Tarrant County children with CASAs were placed with parents or relatives when they left care compared to only 55% of Tarrant County children without a CASA. By tailoring and



replicating CFE into the IFFP pilot with OCOK, CASA also replicated the outcomes of effectively increasing family connections and placements while opening up foster care beds for children in CWOP.

With the success of our IFFP pilot during the CWOP crisis, former investigation supervisor and CASA PD Denee Borchardt and OCOK's Marie Clark worked with Tarrant County Child Protection Court to create the Investigation Family Finding Program, a joint effort between CPS and OCOK. CASA's PD had wanted to try a similar program but there were multifaceted barriers for volunteer advocates to accompany CPS investigators at removal; yet CASA's subject CFE has shown 1) families are more comfortable collaborating with independent groups like CASA advocates since CASA is separate from the system removing the child and keeping the child in foster care and 2) that early engagement with families during the crisis of the first few weeks after a removal increases the likelihood of finding family members to care for children and results in family placements faster. CASA worked with OCOK to develop a proposal for Judge Brown to approve OCOK Family Finders to accompany CPS investigators and talk with family members about possible relatives, allowing families to engage with a different person for the sake of finding family, stability, and normalcy for children during removal.

- This program began in 2022, and as soon as Q1 2022, 40% Tarrant County of children are now being placed in kinship care within 60 days of removal. For comparison, on average only 12% of Tarrant County children were placed with relatives as their first placement after removal between 2017-2021, ranging from 5% to 22%.

None of this would have happened without the support of OCOK and CASA's ability to take on with the monumental task of CBC. Our ability to stay agile, creative, innovative, child-centered, and outcome-focused has been because of the generous and ongoing support of Tarrant County.

In addition to this innovative collaboration with OCOK to create the IFFP, CASA of Tarrant County is also the first CASA program in Texas to expand CFE into its standard advocacy services with its CFE Pilot. In 2021, this started as a small team of Child Advocacy Specialists providing the full CFE model to their cases under the guidance of our CFE Coordinator, and in 2022, this expanded to all Child Advocacy Specialists providing the full CFE model. In 2023, CASA also added a second CFE Coordinator who spends half their time providing CFE consultations with staff and services for families and the other half of their time assisting with Intake of new cases. This position's assistance measurement frameworks CASA of Tarrant County created to better evaluate our CFE services and create replicable models for other CASA programs throughout Texas to implement in their communities – models which are especially important as other Texas communities transition to Community Based Care and continue to face challenges with needing to place children with families for the health and dignity of children and families and due to the ongoing shortage of foster family placements.

In our work to capture the impact of CASA advocacy on family engagement, CASA created a three-tiered assignment system as a measure of family connection. Children are categorized as **Connected**, **Somewhat Connected**, or **Needs** based on whether they are placed with relatives, if a sibling is placed with a relative while another is in a non-relative placement, or if a sibling is with a relative while another is in a non-relative placement.



Connection, ” meaning the child is not placed with relatives. Categories also use measurements of petition dates, eligibility dates, and placement dates to measure the time it took to initiate CFE activities before a child is placed with relatives or fictive kin.

With the Investigation Family Finding Program resulting in 40% of children being placed with relatives within 60 days, this means CASA can focus more on the other 60% - the “Somewhat Connected” “Needs Connection” cases, directing Specialist, advocate, child, and family success. With knowledge gained from the IFFP, CASA’s goal is to maintain a caseload size that is conducive for Specialist, advocate, child, and family success. With “Needs Connection” case. CASA is also using this – if a teacher or coach wants to volunteer but does not have as much free-time, they might be assigned to a “Somewhat Connected” case, and a volunteer might be assigned the more intensive “Needs Connection” cases. This also helps maintain a caseload full of more volunteers who may be lower income, have caregiving responsibilities, and have less free time to advocate. This helps advocates feel successful that they can meet the minimum standard expectations for “Connected” cases and assists in family success. Only this model likely to result in more family placements, less time spent in care, greater permanency, and more social capital for children and families – it creates a solid stewardship model for communities piloting their own CBC programs where time can be more strategically delegated and CASA advocates can be retained to leverage volunteer hours to maximum benefit for children and families.

CASA of Tarrant County staff continues to provide CFE presentations and trainings to other service providers. In addition to providing CFE trainings to Dallas CASA, CASA of Hill County, CASA of North Texas, CASA of Central Texas, and Big Country CASA, CASA of Tarrant County also provided CFE trainings to OCOK, ACH Children and Family Services, and CPS from 2021 to 2023, and we will continue providing all CFE trainings for OCOK staff in 2024.

2024 is the year CASA must continue to expand its quality advocacy programming while increasing the number of Tarrant County children receiving CASA benefits of our CASA volunteers, and all Texas Counties need our tried and true program models, measurement frameworks, and practical supports for their own Community Based Care rollouts during ongoing challenges to foster care bed and staff capacity. Support from Tarrant County in 2024 is a vital piece of delivering better child welfare services not just for Tarrant County but for all of Texas.

The Impact of Your Support

Our success is found in providing as many children as possible with the high quality, lifesaving advocacy every foster child deserves. CASA recruits community members through various outreach activities, including speaking events at clubs and churches, social and print media, radio ads and billboards, and through advertising support from Texas CASA directed towards helping all programs recruit volunteers.

Once volunteers are recruited, they complete a background check and an in-person or virtual video interview where they are screened and selected using high standards based on Praesidium Abuse



Prevention. Once approved, advocates complete over 30 hours of training. In order to ensure the highest quality advocacy, volunteers will continue to be trained in child welfare best practices, such as Collaborative Family Engagement and Trust-Based Relational Intervention® (TBRI®), child development, educational challenges and resources for foster children, evidence-based treatments for common causes of child abuse and neglect including substance abuse, intimate partner violence, intergenerational transmission of violence, mental health, and poverty to help advocates understand how to make a best interest determination for foster children and support the children and their families.

After training, volunteers are sworn in by a judge and appointed to a case of children in foster care. By volunteering for 10-15 hours a month, they share their time, energy, and compassion as they advocate for the child's best interests, and they maintain best practices are used to guide their case assignment, each CASA volunteer is given a Child Advocacy Specialist who ensures they meet the minimum expectations of service, a standardized tool used and created by CASA to cover monthly and quarterly educational, legal, and medical advocacy critical to successful outcomes for children.

Every month, CASA volunteers contact the child at their placement to examine the child's current foster home or relative placement. CASA volunteers also communicate monthly with the child's caregivers, CASA volunteers observe CPS-supervised staff parent/child visits, and provide medical, educational, and legal advocacy as needed and on a quarterly basis at minimum.

- Through **medical advocacy**, CASA volunteers contact children's medical records, and advocate for the child's health, including advocating for trauma-informed care in all foster care settings.
- Through **legal advocacy**, CASA volunteers contact attorneys assigned to the case, write and submit court reports to judges and attorneys attending court, advocating for safe, permanent homes, and actively assisting in identifying, engaging, and gathering information on parents, relatives, fictive kin, and adoptive families who could provide a permanent home for children. Engagement is central to our legal advocacy and in finding safe, permanent homes for children. Legal advocacy can also include gathering information and advocating with law enforcement, detectives in criminal cases related to the child abuse/neglect case, probation officers, immigration officers, and juvenile justice for dual-system children involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.
- Through **educational advocacy**, CASA volunteers contact child care providers, review educational records, and advocate for a quality education. Educational advocacy is especially important due to the educational barriers unique to children in foster care with their frequent school changes due to removal and multiple foster care placements and the impact child adverse experiences and trauma has on their development, resulting in foster children needing more special education and remedial services. Educational advocacy is informed by the Legal Advocacy Framework, focusing on 1) strong foundation for early learners, 2) school stability, 3) enrollment & attendance,



- 4) supporting children to prevent behavioral problems at school, 5) special education needs, 6) student success, graduation & transition to college, and 7) providing supportive adult advocates.

Overall, volunteers gather critical information judge interests, and they advocate for the child's needs counselors' offices to help preserve a foster placement so a child does not have to move to another home and school district, and within the courtroom so the child can go to a safe, permanent home as quickly as possible. The information volunteers gather is compiled into a report submitted to judges, CPS, and attorneys at every court hearing. Child Advocacy Specialists attend every court hearing for the child along with the volunteer advocate, and based on the volunteers' reports, they review

Impact and success of the program is measured by the number of children served, their permanency outcomes, and the number of new and active CASA volunteers. CASA uses an A-B single-system design. Data is documented in an online database specifically designed for CASA programs called Optima, where all case data is maintained, backed up, and sorted into reports.

CASA's CFE Pilot *Connected, Somewhat Connected, and Needs Connected* categories also allows for more precise measurement, including timeframes for moving towards permanency. CASA has also started measuring all school changes to assess mobility, enrollment delays, and to triage educational supports.

In 2023, CASA also launched a new **Collaborative Community Engagement** program as a way to engage with other service providers, connect children and families to place-based community services, better coordinate advocacy for community services based on place-based provider capacity and eligibility, and recruit diverse volunteers from the communities which are more likely to experience child welfare involvement. Since CASA works with any service provider who may serve any Tarrant County child or family involved in the child welfare system, CASA is a true **bridge-builder** providing wrap-around advocacy and staying attached to the child's case state the child may move to during their time in foster care. Further, due to our intervention as independent *advocates*, CASA is a natural **change catalyst** in propelling the child foster home, classroom, doctor's office, and co-dedication to the best interests of a single child or sibling group already results in shorter stays in foster care and increased permanency, and with our Collaborative Community Engagement program, we have started to measure the impact of a CASA on being a change catalyst in connecting children and families with place-based community services, including measuring time between identified need and service delivery and coordinating referral capacity based on our engagement with community partners. As part of our Collaborative Community Engagement, CASA created [Tarrant Family Resources](#) – an online database of service providers available for staff, volunteers, partners, and families involved in the child welfare system. CASA also utilizes Optima and CNM-Pact Dashboard to measure service delivery for children and relationships with community service providers and partners.



For recruitment, CASA partners with Fort Worth ad/PR firm BrandEra to maximize volunteer recruitment and analyze effective recruitment strategies, evaluating recruitment strategies and outcomes monthly. CASA completes surveys for new volunteers and an annual volunteer survey. After case assignment, Optima is utilized to substantiate, measure, and analyze advocacy efforts. Child Advocacy Specialists, who supervise volunteers, track and evaluate volunteer Expectations of Service, a standardized tool used measure case activities that lead to the desired outcome of permanency. CASA closes cases once the final hearing is held and the judge determines if the child will be reunified with parents, placed with relatives, or adopted. While the outcome of the case is ultimately the judge's decision, CASA evaluates decision related to CASA's recommendation.

Every month, supervisors and administrators review data for compliance and trends and present data to CASA Board of Directors. CASA receives data on Tarrant County children who did not have a CASA every spring and compares outcomes to Tarrant County children who did have a CASA. Specifically, the length of time spent in foster care (measured by original petition and court closure dates) and permanency outcomes are compared. Short and long-term goals, as well as professional development goals, are set by CASA Directors and CEO. Internal audits of case files are performed monthly and quarterly with occasional unannounced audits, and suggestions for performance improvements are made through a work plan, if needed.

In 2017, CASA's Collaborative Family Evaluation with Texas Court-Appointed Special Advocates (Texas CASA), Child Protective Services (CPS), the Child and Family Research Partnership at the University of Texas at Austin Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, and the Mexican Consulate. CASA also collaborates with the TCU Karyn Purvis Institute of Child Development and the Tarrant County Mental Health Connections Trauma Committee to implement the trauma-informed care model Trust-Based Relational Intervention® (TBRI®) into its advocacy.

By leveraging the power of volunteers, CASA's program is built on a model that maximizes capacity to serve as many children as possible. One staff member, a Child Advocacy Specialist, manages up to 25 volunteers, and those volunteers serve a cumulative total of approximately 45 children at a time. This allows CASA to serve hundreds of children a year with a staff of 37 full-time employees, utilizing the cost-efficient asset of passionate volunteers who want to help. Volunteers are the core of our agency: in 2022 they contributed approximately 50,000 hours of service, an equivalent of \$1,497,500 (\$29.95 per volunteer hour, Independent Sector²⁴), and donated over 151,600 miles (\$99,298 in donated miles at the federal rate of \$0.655 per mile). Through leveraged volunteer hours, our advocacy makes cost-efficient, high-impact difference in a child's life.

Your support makes a lasting difference in the life of an abused and neglected child. Through the overwhelmingly positive impact of the CASA model on improving outcomes for foster youth, you can

²⁴ Independent Sector, 2022 - <https://independentsector.org/value-of-volunteer-time-2021/>



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help change the trajectory of their lives. Support from Tarrant County brings solutions, safety, permanency, and a healthier future to children and families that will be felt for generations to come. Thank you for your consideration.



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