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## Evaluation of the Virginia Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Program

### Executive Summary

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Particular thanks is offered to Sharyn Behnke, Program Coordinator, CASA of Central Virginia; Edith Duggan, Director, Virginia Beach CASA; Vivian Watts, Executive Director, Fairfax County CASA; Susan Alexander, Child Protective Services Supervisor, Fairfax County Department of Human Development; Sandie Geniesse, Child Protective Services Supervisor, City of Virginia Beach Department of Social Services; and Kitty Hoover, Child Protective Services Supervisor, Lynchburg City Department of Social Services.

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## I. OVERVIEW

The Virginia General Assembly established the Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Program in 1990. The Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) administers this program. DCJS' Juvenile Services Section and Criminal Justice Research Center Evaluation Section agreed that an evaluation of the CASA program was needed for two reasons: (1) to provide a better understanding of CASA activities and program characteristics, and (2) to attempt to determine the impact of CASA intervention on its client population.

The evaluation strategy focused on providing an intensive process evaluation coupled with a small-scale impact evaluation in three sites. Qualitative information for the evaluation was obtained from interviews and surveys of CASA program directors, CASA volunteers, judges, social workers, and Guardians ad Litem (GALs). Quantitative data was obtained from a review of CASA program, social services, and court files for a sample of 78 cases involving 164 children in three localities (Fairfax, Lynchburg, and Virginia Beach).

The lack of detailed data on CASA programs and their impacts precludes us from forming a definitive assessment of this program's long-term effects on its clients. However, extensive survey data suggested that courtroom participants value the program and are largely satisfied with the services it provides. In reporting the perceived benefits of the program, judges, social workers, and GALs frequently cited increased information as an important outcome of CASA intervention.

In addition, case review data emphasized the striking complexity of these cases and the pervasive occurrence of detrimental life circumstances in the population served by CASAs. A subsequent review of CASA activities and recommendations to the court indicated that CASAs are indeed focusing their attention on the children in these difficult cases, and thereby fulfilling their roles as child advocates. Survey data further indicated that providing additional support to these troubled families (particularly the children) and the workers who deal with them is clearly considered to be a worthwhile contribution by judges and other involved professionals. Supplemental evaluation activities revealed very little evidence to dispute this claim.

Although the program is well-received, the evaluators have identified several areas where program administration and operation may be improved. These areas include:

- exploration of geographical expansion to rural sites;
- strategies for program start-up;
- role clarification for CASAs, social workers, and GALs;
- training and procedures for database development and management;
- creation of standardized forms for program data collection and evaluation purposes;
- training for CASA program directors;
- enhanced training for volunteers, to include standardized training requirements;
- reviewing and/or redefining the scope of the program (i.e., cases appropriate for referral);
- reviewing and/or revising formats for CASA court reports.

The full report, *Evaluation of the Virginia Court-Appointed Special Advocates Program, Final Report*, is available from the Department of Criminal Justice Services.

## **II. DESCRIPTION OF THE CASA PROGRAM**

In 1990, the Virginia General Assembly established the Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Program. CASAs are volunteers who serve as child advocates in juvenile court proceedings. They are primarily involved in abuse/neglect, and, less frequently, custody and CHINS (Children in Need of Supervision or Children in Need of Services) cases. As the name implies, CASA volunteers are appointed by the judge after a petition is brought to court. The statutes that govern the CASA program do not require that a CASA be appointed in any case; this decision is left to the presiding judge.

As set forth in the Code of Virginia, CASAs are trained to investigate cases, report their findings to the court, monitor post-dispositional events (such as compliance with court-ordered services), and assist the Guardian ad Litem (GAL), the attorney who represents the child in court proceedings. In contrast to the large caseloads of social workers who deal with these cases, CASAs generally work on one or two cases at a time.

CASA programs are typically designed to meet the needs of the community. To that end, the state policies and regulations that govern these programs are constructed to provide program directors with significant flexibility in programming. Policies are, for the most part, created at the local level; however, the Advisory Committee to the Court-Appointed Special Advocate and Children's Justice Act Programs does assist in local policy development by providing directors with model program policies.

The number of Virginia CASA programs has steadily increased since the beginning of this evaluation; twenty-one CASA programs are currently operational. Current programs heavily represent the Central and Eastern areas of the state, with little representation in the far Southwest.

## **III. METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS**

The Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) is responsible for administering the CASA program. In this capacity, DCJS coordinates services, provides funds, and participates in the development and dissemination of program information and regulations. Given these responsibilities, DCJS' Juvenile Services Section and Criminal Justice Research Center Evaluation Section agreed that an assessment of the CASA program was needed. The Evaluation Section was awarded a grant from the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) to receive technical assistance; CASA was selected as the program to be evaluated under this grant.

Because of data limitations, the evaluation strategy focused on providing a process evaluation of the CASA program in Virginia coupled with a small-scale impact evaluation in three sites, to the

degree it was feasible. The findings from these activities provide descriptive information on the CASA program in Virginia, perceptions of the program benefits, problems, etc. from several relevant case professionals, satisfaction with the program, and a limited amount of impact information.

This evaluation incorporates qualitative and quantitative data from three primary sources: (1) personal interviews and surveys of CASA program directors, (2) surveys of CASA volunteers, judges, social workers, and GALs, and (3) reviews of case files.

### **Program Director Interviews and Surveys**

Program directors were interviewed to obtain information regarding their respective CASA programs. The interview included questions about program policies and procedures, volunteer training, perceptions of CASA impact, and relationships with relevant courtroom participants such as judges, social workers, and GALs. Directors also responded to a written survey instrument, which provided descriptive information about the individual programs. Key findings from these data are described below.

- A review of individual program policies and procedures revealed considerable variability across programs. In general, program administration is state-regulated to allow for local program flexibility.
- Data for these programs are sparse. Although state regulations direct the documentation and reporting of CASA program data (e.g., number of volunteers, number of cases served, etc.), few requirements exist at the local level for CASA case-specific recordkeeping, partially because directors are sensitive to the fact that CASAs are volunteer workers.
- In addition to funding availability, difficulties with database management and duplicative statistical reporting requirements were reported as primary concerns of the directors.
- Directors are fairly satisfied with the amount and type of referrals they currently receive from judges, but some indicated an interest in increasing the frequency of abuse/neglect referrals.
- Directors perceive judges, social workers, and GALs as expecting the CASA program to provide increased information.
- Directors agree that information provision is one of the most important impacts of their local programs. They contend that CASAs can collect more information than social workers, in part, because they have much smaller caseloads. Consequently, CASAs were believed to have more time available for case monitoring activities. However, directors do cite many other impacts, including effects on long-term outcomes such as permanency placement and returns to the social services/court system.

### **CASA Volunteer, Judge, Social Worker, and Guardian Ad Litem Surveys**

Evaluators constructed surveys which were administered to CASA volunteers, judges, social workers, and GALs. The Judge, GAL, and Social Worker Surveys elicited information on a variety of topics, including relationships with the local CASA program, perceptions of CASA benefits and

potential detriments, perceptions of the CASA, GAL, and social worker roles, and satisfaction with the program. The CASA Volunteer Survey contained similar questions. Important findings from these data are summarized below.

- Overall satisfaction with the program was high across judges, social workers, and GALs.
- Judges, social workers, and GALs pointed out many positive aspects of the program, but most frequently cited increased information as a benefit. Many respondents also suggested that CASAs are able to provide more intensive case monitoring than social workers. Other commonly mentioned benefits were the support of the child and assistance to professionals.
- CASA volunteer relationships with judges were described very positively. Based on social worker and CASA volunteer responses, relationships with social workers were also generally positive, although many instances of “mixed” feelings were noted. Relationships with the GALs were rated lower than any other relationship by CASAs. Conversely, GALs rated their relationships with CASAs very positively.
- When asked about potential detriments of the program, judges and social workers emphasized CASA over-involvement. Although many noted this concern, few had actually seen this type of problem occur. Courtroom professionals were concerned that over-involvement by the CASA may increase the stress felt by the child upon termination of the CASA worker’s involvement.
- Although the CASA volunteers, judges, social workers, and GALs showed general agreement on perceptions of volunteer roles, role distinctions do not always appear to be clear in practice. Social workers particularly noted a problem with role confusion. Specifically, they often perceived CASAs as desiring an authoritative role over social services, which sometimes led to decision-making without social worker input. CASA volunteers revealed a somewhat different view. CASA volunteers, CASA directors, and judges suggested system monitoring as an important benefit of the program. According to volunteers, social workers have tremendous caseloads and few resources, thus the CASA is believed to prevent children from “falling through the cracks.”
- Legal training and community resources were particularly suggested by CASA volunteers, social workers, and GALs as areas where more volunteer training is desirable. Judges, social workers, and GALs emphasized the CASAs’ lack of expertise in legal matters, stressing that it sometimes led to unrealistic expectations from the volunteers. In addition, other professionals were concerned regarding the lack of cultural diversity in the volunteer base and the need for more extensive cultural diversity training.
- CASA volunteers, CASA directors, judges, and social workers were consistent in questioning the role of the GAL. Most respondents stated that they wished GALs contributed more to the process.



### **Case File Reviews**

The third data source consisted of case file reviews of a random sample of 78 CASA cases in three evaluation sites: Fairfax County, Lynchburg, and Virginia Beach. These sites were selected based in part on the information obtained from the initial interviews with program directors. To gather the most complete description of each case, the evaluators reviewed CASA, Juvenile & Domestic Relations Court, and local Department of Social Services or Department of Human Development (Child Protective Services and Foster Care) files. The information collected from these files covered a wide range of areas, including victim and abuser demographics, characteristics of the case, previous abuse history, family history variables, contacts with system participants, court orders, and compliance information. Significant findings from these data are discussed below.

- In addition to child abuse/neglect issues (which were present in most instances), the families involved in these cases appeared to have many other problems. Most of the victims had at least one major difficulty, for example, a physical disability, that undoubtedly affected family dynamics and adaptability. The abusers also had many problems, including mental illness, criminal behavior, and substance abuse. The family structures involved in these cases were also quite complicated, involving multiple fathers and extended households.
- CASAs made significantly more recommendations relating to the victims than did social workers. This finding suggests that CASAs are indeed focusing their attention on the children in these cases, and fulfilling the role of child advocate.
- During the investigation phase of a case, CASAs showed more instances of contacts with the victims, while social workers were more likely to contact abusers and other family members. The additional finding that CASAs had contact with fewer groups than social workers in the monitoring phase is somewhat contradictory to our survey findings, which suggested that CASAs provide more intensive case monitoring than social workers. One explanation for this discrepancy is that CASA documentation of these activities is inadequate, making the comparison invalid. If this is the case, claims of increased monitoring efficiency by CASAs cannot be supported or refuted with CASA case-specific data as it is currently being collected.
- The vast majority of CASA recommendations were either fully or partially incorporated into the court orders. This finding implies that CASA input is being considered by the judges in many cases; however, the direct influence of CASA recommendations on judges is unknown.
- Almost one-quarter of closed cases involving CASAs were returned to the system, either through the court or social services. This finding is very difficult to interpret without comparison to an appropriate non-CASA group.

## **IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The lack of detailed data on CASA programs and their impacts precludes us from forming a definitive assessment of this program's long term effects on its clients. However, extensive

survey data suggested that courtroom participants value the program and are largely satisfied with the services it provides. For instance, judges, social workers, and GALs frequently cited the provision of increased information to the court, attorneys, and caseworkers as a primary benefit of the program. This benefit was partially attributed to the fact that small CASA caseloads allow volunteers to provide more intensive case monitoring than social workers, who are constrained by heavy caseloads and limited resources. Furthermore, courtroom professionals typically characterized their relationships with CASAs as positive. In addition, case review data indicated that CASAs' recommendations were fairly consistent with court orders, implying that their input is being considered in the decision-making process.

Other case review data, which examined family history variables relevant to victims and abusers, emphasized the striking complexity of these cases and the pervasive occurrence of detrimental life circumstances in the population served by CASAs. Furthermore, a review of CASA activities and recommendations to the court indicated that CASAs are indeed focusing their attention on the children in these complex cases, and thereby fulfilling their roles as child advocates. Survey data further indicated that providing additional support to these families (particularly the children) and the workers who deal with them is clearly considered to be a worthwhile contribution by judges and other involved professionals. Supplemental evaluation activities revealed very little evidence to dispute this claim.

Although the program is well-received, the evaluators have identified several areas where program administration and operation may be improved; the following recommendations were developed to address these issues. These recommendations are based upon the quantitative and qualitative data presented in the full report. Some of these recommendations are based on data from only three localities; therefore, these recommendations should be examined closely to determine their applicability to other CASA programs.

## **Role Clarification**

- **Program directors, judges, social workers, and GALs should work together to devise a method to clarify participant roles in each locality.**

Survey data indicated that volunteers, social workers, and GALs are frequently unsure of the CASA's role. Social workers in particular expressed their lack of understanding of the CASA's role, and the fact that this information has not been communicated to them.

The issue of role "boundaries" seemed to generate mixed reactions from volunteers and social workers. Both volunteers and social workers indicated that the relationship between them was generally cooperative and respectful. Some, however, reported less positive relationships related to territorial issues. CASAs and social workers sometimes suffer from ineffective communication between the two. Each group sometimes perceives itself as the adversary and expressed concern that this may affect the information sharing between them. This issue could be addressed, in part, by social workers giving CASAs equal access to relevant case materials.

By the same token, CASAs should recognize the professional training of social workers and present differing opinions in a collegial manner.

Several CASAs viewed their role as becoming a friend to the child. Other CASAs emphatically stated that this is not the CASA role. This point certainly needs to be clarified at the local and state level, as “over-involvement” is the most prevalent complaint regarding CASAs offered by other professionals.

CASA directors and volunteers were dissatisfied with the sometimes unrealistic or inappropriate expectations that judges, social workers, and GALs may have of the program. To address this issue, all parties should participate in a formal agreement to solidify the expectations of each, and consider issues such as visitation supervision and transportation that often become points of contention.

In addition, judges, social workers, CASA directors, and CASA volunteers consistently questioned the role of the GAL in these cases. Many CASA volunteers expressed the opinion that most GALs, while helpful when legal questions arise, spend little time on a case, do little in the way of investigation, and often do not meet the victim until the court appearance. Volunteers and judges expressed their hopes that the new GAL training regulations would improve this situation. Future programming decisions should explore the interrelatedness of the GAL and CASA roles; this examination may be useful to maximize efficiency of the court process in the best interest of the child.

## **Geographical Expansion**

- **DCJS and the Advisory Committee to the Court-Appointed Special Advocate and Children’s Justice Act Programs should explore the feasibility of program expansion to rural areas.**

The development of individual CASA programs across the state originates at the local level. Current programs are geographically concentrated in urban and suburban areas of Central and Eastern Virginia. Apart from a few new programs, rural areas have been slow to initiate the development of these programs. Further study should examine the feasibility of expansion in these areas, based in part on input from the currently operating rural programs.

## **Program Start-Up**

- **Directors of new programs should make strong efforts to secure social services “buy-in” at program inception.**

Many programs are currently employing this approach. Based on the evaluation data, programs that include social services in program development have markedly better relationships with social services. Consequently, social workers were more likely to express high satisfaction with

the CASA programs in these localities. In addition, social workers also indicated a desire for more collaboration with CASA programs. Based on these findings, conflict resolution between the CASA program and social services (when needed) might be facilitated by including the latter in early stages of program development. Securing the social services buy-in could take the form of including social services officials on local advisory boards and in CASA training; these policies have already been adopted by several local programs.

## **Program Standardization (Data)**

- **DCJS should provide additional training for program directors and the clerical staff on database development and management, and should explore software packages specifically designed for CASA programs.**

The database software package (Paradox) that DCJS provided to local programs is not well understood by many staff and directors. Some directors simply do not use their database because they do not understand how to operate it. In addition, many directors expressed frustration in using the database to access the information necessary to complete DCJS quarterly reports and other required documentation. The Chesapeake CASA program makes use of the CASA Manager, a software package developed specifically for use in CASA programs. DCJS should explore the utility of this program and other software programs (if available) that are application specific. Regardless of which software package is used, DCJS should ensure that CASA program staff are adequately trained in its use.

- **Virginia CASA program directors should collaborate to develop a set of standardized forms for inclusion in all CASA case files.**

In evaluating this program, researchers discovered that obtaining basic information about CASA cases was a difficult and time-consuming process. In addition, our attempts to address purported CASA impacts were significantly hindered by the lack of available data. Standardized forms should be created for the following reasons:

1. *Programs need a standardized base of case data that is consistently collected.* At this point, programs have very little retrievable information on each case. Information available in the database is initially entered and rarely updated. One or two short forms could easily provide a written record of basic information, such as client and abuser demographics, household and family structure, and relevant life circumstances variables (e.g., parental drug addiction, mental illness, etc.). Important program data would include the type of case, the name of each CASA and social worker who has staffed the case, and the length of time each worked on the case.
2. *Programs need data to support claims of CASA impacts.* Directors suggested many areas of CASA impact (e.g., decreased time in out-of-home placement, and decreased court processing time) that could not be supported with available data. Programs must document this type of information in order to demonstrate the validity of these claims. Important outcome-relevant information could easily be collected on a single form. As an example of out-of-home placement

documentation, each CASA volunteer might be asked to complete a short table to document each placement type and the time spent in each placement. This type of documentation, which is currently used in some social services departments, provides a simple method for maintaining important impact information. Additionally, program directors should pursue court cooperation in obtaining follow-up information on long-term outcomes in CASA cases. For example, volunteers could follow clients through the Court Services Unit to determine instances of subsequent court activity.

3. *Volunteers should keep a running record of case activities to describe case involvement, enhance accountability, and facilitate future evaluations of the program.* Volunteer contact logs are currently recommended, but not required, by most CASA programs. Without this information, the CASA program is unable to document the services that the volunteers provide to the child, family, and other relevant parties. In short, this leaves them unable to account for how they spend their time, and leaves untestable the claim that CASAs provide more intensive contact and monitoring than social workers. In addition, CASAs may withdraw from a case, leaving little information for the volunteers who replace them. Many CASAs resist contact log completion because it is perceived as too time consuming. However, most CASAs do keep a personal log of case activities in an unstandardized form. This being the case, the completion of contact logs would enhance CASA program/case documentation dramatically without significantly increasing paperwork burdens on the volunteers. Contact log documentation would also increase the future evaluability of this program. These logs should ideally collect descriptive yet succinct information, including the date of the contact, the person contacted or the activity performed, the amount of time spent on the activity, and a brief description of the activity.

## **Training**

- **A formalized training program for CASA Directors should be established.**

No formalized training program exists for CASA directors in Virginia. The majority of directors expressed the desire for such a program to be established. This training should cover topics relevant to CASA program administration (i.e., fundraising), volunteer supervision, and interagency collaboration. Directors are particularly interested in obtaining a more comprehensive understanding of state law, legal issues, and court procedures. This training should be developed and regulated by DCJS and the Advisory Committee. The National CASA Association may also be of some assistance in developing the curriculum for this training.

- **Standardize training requirements for CASA volunteers.**

Although state regulations do require a minimum of 25 hours of classroom training for new CASA volunteers, training requirements for in-service training, courtroom observation, and community service field observation are not adequately defined. Directors exercise considerable latitude in interpreting these requirements. As a result, training requirements show substantial

variability across local programs. Given that courtroom professionals are concerned with variability in volunteer expertise, DCJS and the Advisory Committee should revise statewide training requirements for volunteers, in particular, to provide minimum requirements for in-service training and courtroom observation. Documentation of training experiences should be required as a permanent part of the CASA volunteer's personnel file.

- **Volunteer training should be modified in the following six areas:**

1. *Increase volunteer understanding of state laws, legal issues surrounding abuse/neglect, and juvenile court procedures.* Judges, social workers, and GALs expressed frustration with CASAs' lack of knowledge and/or awareness of legal constraints involved in child abuse/neglect cases. These professionals maintain that CASAs sometimes have unrealistic expectations of the court and social services. Volunteers likewise expressed dissatisfaction with their level of knowledge in this area. Currently, programs may determine the amount of legal training provided to volunteers at the local level. It is recommended that program directors increase legal training and address this aspect of training as a priority. Moreover, DCJS and the Advisory Committee should consider establishing a statewide minimum requirement for volunteer training on this specific topic. In addition, courtroom observation is currently not required by state regulations as an element of CASA training. However, judges, CASA volunteers, and CASA directors frequently stated that this is a beneficial way to learn about the role of the court and courtroom participants in child abuse/neglect cases. For these reasons, courtroom observation should be a required component of CASA training in all localities. Further study should determine: (1) the specific classroom content for legal training, (2) the most appropriate amount of such training, and (3) the minimum requirements for courtroom observation.

2. *Increase volunteer awareness of community resources.* Social workers and CASA volunteers were similarly dissatisfied with the CASAs' level of knowledge regarding available community resources. Respondents suggested that CASAs need a thorough knowledge of available options in order to make informed recommendations to the court. As with legal training, the amount of required training in community resources is determined by the individual programs. All programs incorporate some degree of classroom training on community resources (as little as 1 hour); however, only a few programs require field observation of local community service providers. It is also noteworthy that the volunteers themselves often report feeling undertrained in this topic. Therefore, the recommendations in this area are twofold. First, program directors should enhance community resource knowledge by increasing classroom training and encouraging or requiring field observations. Second, program directors should ensure that an up-to-date community resource guide is always available at the CASA office.

3. *Expand emphasis on cultural diversity training.* Courtroom professionals expressed some concern with the differences between CASA volunteers and the clients they serve. CASA volunteers are, for the most part, white, middle-class females, while their clients have very disparate backgrounds. Judges and social workers, in particular, suggested that some CASAs may have difficulty understanding the life circumstances of their client population. Although the amount of cultural diversity training is determined at the local level, some CASA directors acknowledged that this element of the CASAs' training is underemphasized. Thus, program

directors should continue to include, and expand emphasis on, cultural diversity training for new volunteers. Additions to the cultural diversity training curriculum should likewise be provided to currently active volunteers through in-service training sessions.

4. *Increase volunteer understanding of the CASA, social worker, and GAL roles.* As described in the Role Clarification section of these recommendations, courtroom participants seem unsure of the CASA role. Judges and social workers additionally suggested that CASAs should become more aware of social worker training, abilities, and restraints. To ensure understanding of these roles, CASA programs should expand emphasis on role clarification in volunteer training, and increase efforts to educate social workers about CASA roles, training, background, and experience. Although many CASA programs currently enlist judges, social workers, and GALs to participate in role clarification training, it is further recommended that all CASA programs adopt this training strategy.

5. *Incorporate or emphasize training on the related topics of case closure and CASA/client separation.* A review of CASA training protocols and case files revealed little consideration of steps toward case closure and CASA/client separation. Judges and social workers noted that children may feel “dropped” by the CASA if the case is closed abruptly. Currently, case closure and CASA/client separation are not included as required elements of CASA volunteer training. It is therefore recommended that these topics be incorporated into the required training curriculum. Program directors should address these topics in training for new volunteers and offer similar in-service training for currently active volunteers.

6. *Incorporate or emphasize training on the case monitoring function.* Monitoring is specifically stated in the Code of Virginia as one duty of the CASA volunteer; however, no state regulations address this function nor do CASA programs typically have policies guiding these activities. Given that monitoring is reported to be a large part of the CASA role by volunteers and program directors, volunteer classroom training should be required on this topic to clarify the goals of monitoring. This training should also address strategies for effective monitoring and troubleshooting related to completing monitoring tasks.

## Scope of the Program

- **Judges and program directors should consider continuing CASA’s use in complex custody cases, and addressing CHINS assignments in a more selective manner.**

CASA programs generally prioritize their assignments such that abuse/neglect cases are the primary cases of concern. However, some programs are capable of handling other types of cases, such as custody or CHINS cases. Custody cases often involve children who are caught in the middle of family conflict, and are thereby experiencing significant psychological distress. Unlike many children in abuse/neglect cases who are removed from the volatile environments, children in custody cases are often the focal point of ongoing conflict. For the most part, social services departments are not involved in these cases unless an abuse/neglect investigation is

required. Although many of these cases are assigned to the CASA program based on custody petitions, our file review showed that abuse/neglect often emerges as a factor much later in the case. Therefore, these children are not receiving services from any other source, at least initially. In addition, many judges would like to see the CASA program used more in custody cases. For these reasons, custody cases seem to be an appropriate area for CASA intervention. It is recommended that judges and program directors continue to service these cases, when locally appropriate.

On the other hand, CHINS cases often involve older children who are already known to the court as juvenile offenders. Our review of CASA files in CHINS cases suggested that there is little for a CASA to do on such cases. CASAs experienced difficulties in locating many of these children because they have runaway or truancy problems. Judges expressed some interest in using CASAs more in CHINS cases (even though judges reported assigning CASAs in no more than 10% of their entire CHINS caseload), but this idea should be carefully examined before expanding use in this area. Although the children in these cases certainly need services, it appears as though CASA intervention would be most beneficial on cases which are consistent with their specific training, as opposed to CHINS cases which frequently involve substantially different issues.

## **CASA Reports**

- **Program directors should consider the utility of a standardized format for court reports.**

Judges and GALs report that the information contained in the CASA report is very helpful. Because CASA volunteers' reports vary tremendously in style and content, a standardized format may facilitate the dissemination of this important information. For this type of change to be effective, program directors should meet with judges to assess user needs. One possible format would involve a series of "check-off" boxes to record basic information about the victim, the abuser, and the family situation, compiled with a narrative section for more descriptive information. A report format such as this could simultaneously address several data needs. Standardized reporting might also lessen the time and effort necessary to write the report. In addition, less articulate volunteers may not be as intimidated by the reporting requirements, which may have positive impacts on volunteer recruitment and turnover.





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### Final Report

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April, 1996

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The mission of the Criminal Justice Research Center of the Department of Criminal Justice Services is to provide accurate and comprehensive data and research to guide strategic, policy, and budgetary decision-making on criminal justice issues, policies, and programs. The Center is responsible for the coordination, collection, statistical analysis, and interpretation of system-wide data on crime and criminals in Virginia.

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## I. SUMMARY

The Virginia General Assembly established the Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Program in 1990. The Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) administers this program. DCJS' Juvenile Services Section and the Criminal Justice Research Center Evaluation Section agreed that an evaluation of the CASA program was needed for two reasons: (1) to provide a better understanding of CASA activities and program characteristics, and (2) to attempt to determine the impact of CASA intervention on its client population.

The evaluation strategy focused on providing an intensive process evaluation coupled with a small-scale impact evaluation in three sites. Qualitative information for the evaluation was obtained from interviews and surveys of CASA program directors, CASA volunteers, judges, social workers, and Guardians ad Litem (GALs). Quantitative data was obtained from a review of CASA program, social services, and court files for a sample of 78 cases involving 164 children in three localities (Fairfax, Lynchburg, and Virginia Beach).

The lack of detailed data on CASA programs and their impacts precludes us from forming a definitive assessment of this program's long term effects on its clients. However, extensive survey data suggested that courtroom participants value the program and are largely satisfied with the services it provides. For instance, judges, social workers, and GALs frequently cited the provision of increased information to the court, attorneys, and caseworkers as a primary benefit of the program. Courtroom professionals also typically characterized their relationships with the CASA program as positive.

In addition, case review data which examined family history variables relevant to victims and abusers emphasized the striking complexity of these cases and the pervasive occurrence of detrimental life circumstances in the population served by CASAs. A subsequent review of CASA activities and recommendations to the court indicated that CASAs are indeed focusing their attention on the children in these complex cases, and thereby fulfilling their roles as child advocates. Survey data further indicated that providing additional support to these families (particularly the children) and the workers who deal with them is clearly considered to be a worthwhile contribution by judges and other involved professionals. Supplemental evaluation activities revealed very little evidence to dispute this claim.

Although the CASA program is well-received, the evaluators have identified several areas where program administration and operation may be improved. These areas include:

- exploration of geographical expansion to rural sites;
- strategies for program start-up;
- role clarification for CASAs, social workers, and GALs;
- training and procedures for database development and management;
- creation of standardized forms for program data collection and evaluation purposes;
- training for CASA program directors;
- enhanced training for volunteers, to include standardized training requirements;
- reviewing and/or redefining the scope of the program (i.e., cases appropriate for referral);
- reviewing and/or revising formats for CASA court reports.

Once systematic data collection has been implemented, it should be possible to provide a more empirically-based assessment of the outcomes of CASA cases.

## II. INTRODUCTION

In 1990, the Virginia General Assembly enacted legislation which established the Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Program. CASAs are volunteers who serve as child advocates in juvenile court proceedings, particularly in abuse and neglect situations. The Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) is responsible for administering the CASA program. In this capacity, DCJS coordinates services, provides funds, and participates in the development and dissemination of program information and regulations. Given these responsibilities, DCJS' Juvenile Services Section and the Criminal Justice Research Center Evaluation Section agreed that an assessment of the CASA program was needed.

The Evaluation Section was awarded a grant from the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) to participate in its State and Local Participatory Evaluation Program. This program uses a team-building approach to conduct evaluations by including state- and/or local-level evaluators, program stakeholders, and NIJ representatives in the research effort. The purposes of this program are to: (1) build partnerships among evaluators, local agencies, and NIJ, (2) enable assistance to be provided in response to the needs of the participating agencies, (3) strengthen evaluation approaches within these agencies, and (4) encourage stakeholder involvement in evaluation activities. CASA was subsequently selected as the program to be evaluated under this grant. Consequently, state and local program administrators, members of the Advisory Committee to the CASA and Children's Justice Act Programs (hereafter referred to as the Advisory Committee), and NIJ technical consultants also became involved in the evaluation process.

The original evaluation plan proposed to investigate the impact of CASA involvement in child abuse/neglect cases by comparing outcomes for children served by CASAs to a comparable set of cases with no CASA intervention. The evaluators were forced to abandon this strategy for several reasons:

- The unavailability of accurate statewide data on individual abuse/neglect cases heard in Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Courts made selection of a comparison group unfeasible.
- Initial interviews with program directors revealed substantial variability across programs on key process variables (such as training). In addition, program directors and other state and local administrators seemed to have a limited understanding of policies and procedures of CASA programs across the state. These findings indicated the need for a thorough process examination as the primary focus of the evaluation effort.

- A preliminary review of file data maintained by the CASA programs, courts, and local social services departments revealed a lack of information on services provided or outcomes of cases, rendering an extensive impact evaluation impossible.

Because of these limitations, the focus of the evaluation was shifted to providing a process evaluation of the CASA program in Virginia coupled with a small-scale impact evaluation in three sites, to the degree it was feasible. The findings from these activities provide descriptive information on the CASA program in Virginia, perceptions of the program benefits and problems from several relevant case professionals, satisfaction with the program, and a limited amount of impact information. Recommendations are provided for consideration in future programming and evaluation plans.

### III. DESCRIPTION OF THE CASA PROGRAM

Court-Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) are volunteers who serve as child advocates in juvenile court proceedings. They are primarily involved in providing services to children in abuse/neglect, and less frequently, custody and CHINS (Children in Need of Supervision or Children in Need of Services) cases. As the name implies, CASA volunteers are appointed by the judge after a petition is brought to court. The statutes that govern the CASA program do not require that a CASA be appointed in any case; this decision is left to the presiding judge.

As set forth in the Code of Virginia, CASAs are trained to investigate cases, report their findings to the court, monitor post-dispositional events (such as compliance with court-ordered services), and assist the Guardian ad Litem (GAL), the attorney who represents the child in court proceedings. In contrast to the large caseloads of social workers who deal with these cases, CASAs typically work on one or two cases at a time. These small caseloads help prevent volunteer workers from becoming overburdened.

Generally, CASA programs strive to ensure that victims of abuse/neglect who are also under the purview of the court are provided with a safe and nurturing environment. CASAs attempt to accomplish this goal by providing judges with thorough reports which facilitate informed decision-making. They also advocate for the victims by giving them a voice in the courtroom and providing support. In addition, CASAs provide assistance to the court, attorneys, and social services representatives in fulfilling their respective obligations to abused/neglected children.

CASA programs are typically designed to meet the needs of the community. To that end, the state policies and regulations that govern these programs are constructed to provide program directors with significant flexibility in programming. Policies are, for the most part, created at the local level; however, the Advisory Committee does assist in local policy development by providing directors with model program policies.

### **CASA at the National Level**

Interest in the CASA movement is rapidly growing, as is evident by the increasing number of CASA programs across the country. By 1994, there were nearly 600 programs and 37,000 CASAs throughout the United States who had contributed more than 3 million volunteer hours. Spreading interest in CASA programs led to the formation of the National CASA Association in 1982, which was formed to direct the growth and implementation of local programs. The CASA concept is endorsed by the American Bar Association, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, and the National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators.

### **Virginia CASA Program History**

The CASA program in Virginia grew out of efforts directed at permanency planning, that is, securing a safe and nurturing permanent placement, for children in foster care. In 1985, a task force, which was established to monitor compliance with provisions of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act, provided training to judges on permanency planning. However, it became apparent that additional support was needed at the local level to further enhance permanency planning efforts. In 1987, this task force began to work toward the goal of promoting technical assistance for CASA program development. In 1990, the General Assembly enacted legislation which provided for the establishment of CASA programs throughout the Commonwealth.

### **Virginia CASA Program Structure**

The structure of CASA programs in Virginia varies. As of June 1994, four programs operated as private non-profit organizations, six operated as programs under the umbrella of a private non-profit organization, one operated as an agency of local government, and one was administered by the local court. While most CASA programs serviced only one locality, other CASA programs served up to four localities.

A review of program data for fiscal year 1994 indicated that program size and funding is also quite variable. CASA programs operated with as little as one part-time staff member to as many as two full- and six part-time staff members. The number of active CASA volunteers ranged from 13 to 125; on average, CASA programs had 35 volunteers per program. Funding ranged from a low of \$20,544 for a very small program, to \$157,742 for the largest CASA program. Programs obtained funding from a variety of sources, including DCJS funds, Virginia Law Foundation, Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) monies, local government funds, and miscellaneous sources.

### **Geographical Scope of the Virginia CASA Program**

Twenty-one CASA programs are currently operational in Virginia. The first Virginia CASA program was established in 1985 in Newport News. Eleven additional CASA programs became operational in Virginia cities and counties by 1993: Alexandria, Chesapeake, Fairfax County, Hanover County, Lynchburg Area (Central Virginia), Martinsville Area, Norfolk, Rappahannock



Area, Richmond, Roanoke, and Virginia Beach. (A thirteenth program, in Williamsburg, was operational in 1993 but closed early in 1994; this program has recently reopened). Five new CASA programs became operational in 1994: Buchanan County, Franklin County, Henrico County, Petersburg, and Prince William County. Three additional programs, Charlottesville, Waynesboro, and Wise County, have hired directors and are recruiting or training volunteers. Current CASA programs heavily represent the Central and Eastern portions of the state, with little representation in the far Southwest.

Due to program growth and a few program closings, the number of active programs changed several times during the course of the evaluation. Consequently, the number of programs used in data collection varied for certain measures. The methodology and results note the number of programs involved in each phase of the evaluation.

## IV. METHODOLOGY

This evaluation incorporates qualitative and quantitative data from three primary sources: (1) personal interviews with the CASA program directors, (2) surveys of CASA volunteers, CASA program directors, judges, social workers, and GALs, and (3) reviews of case files.

### **Preliminary Interviews**

After conducting a review of existing CASA program data and discussing the program with various local officials, questions remained regarding the day-to-day operations of the local programs and the roles played by various participants (CASA program directors, judges, CASA volunteers, etc.). Twelve program directors were interviewed in-person to obtain information regarding their respective CASA programs. Interview questions explored the volunteer training requirements, the procedures for assigning CASA volunteers, the frequency of CASA assignment by local judges, the procedures for prioritizing assignment of cases on the waiting list, the guidelines/requirements for case activity recordkeeping, the monitoring philosophy of the program, the relationships between the CASAs and other agencies, and each director's perceptions of CASA impact. This information served the dual purposes of gaining an understanding of the programs and guiding the selection of programs to be studied in greater detail.

Directors of new CASA programs were also interviewed with a slightly modified interview instrument to collect basic information about these programs. Of the four new program directors interviewed, two were interviewed in-person and two were interviewed by phone.

Site Selection. With guidance from the preliminary interview data, intensive evaluation sites were chosen on the basis of program characteristics, logistical concerns, and geography. After considering these factors, Lynchburg, Fairfax County, and Virginia Beach were chosen as the evaluation sites. These three sites provided a geographical mix, had relatively complete data available, and had fairly dissimilar program profiles.

## Survey Data

Evaluators constructed surveys which were administered to CASA volunteers, CASA directors, judges, social workers (in three evaluation sites only), and GALs (in three evaluation sites only)<sup>1</sup>. Survey materials were reviewed by relevant parties and a subcommittee of the Advisory Committee.

The Judge, GAL, and Social Worker Surveys elicited information on a variety of topics, including relationships with the local CASA program, perceptions of the benefits and potential detriments of CASA intervention, perceptions of the CASA, GAL, and social worker roles, and satisfaction with the program. The CASA Volunteer Survey contained similar questions. The Director Survey provided descriptive information about the individual programs, such as the amount of legal training required for volunteers and the procedures used to evaluate volunteer performance. These data were used to supplement the information gathered from directors during the preliminary interviews. Judges were interviewed by phone while all other surveys were collected in a written format.

Program Director Survey. Program directors of 18 operational CASA programs were distributed surveys by mail. All directors had previously been informed by the DCJS CASA Program Coordinator that an evaluation of the CASA program was being conducted by DCJS. Directors who had not responded by the due date were subsequently prompted on two occasions to return their completed surveys.

CASA Volunteer Survey. The CASA Volunteer Survey instrument was reviewed by six CASA program directors prior to distribution. All CASA program directors were contacted and asked to compile a list of current CASA volunteers and their addresses. The survey (along with a stamped, addressed envelope) was mailed to every active volunteer in the 12 operational program sites. Directors were asked to encourage all volunteers to complete and return the survey. All directors indicated that they had communicated this prompt to volunteers through written, personal, or phone contact. After the due date, all directors were contacted on two separate occasions to inform them of the response rate for their respective program, and to again ask them to remind volunteers to return the surveys. After the last prompt, the DCJS CASA Program Coordinator was contacted and asked to encourage directors to facilitate volunteer participation.

Judge Survey. A list of all judges who were presiding in 12 operational CASA localities across the state was compiled to identify the interview sample. Each judge on the list was sent an introductory letter which explained the project, and indicated that an evaluator would be calling to schedule a convenient time to interview him/her by phone. Two interviewers subsequently called the judges to schedule appointments and conduct interviews. Due to unpredictable schedules, it was often necessary to call judges several times to make interview arrangements. By phone, the judges' survey required approximately 20-30 minutes of interview time, on average. To encourage participation, judges were also given the option to return the survey in a written form.

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<sup>1</sup> Due to their length, survey instruments are not included in this document; they may be obtained from the Department of Criminal Justice Services.

Social Worker Survey. The Social Worker Survey was distributed to social workers in the three evaluation sites who had worked or may have worked with CASA volunteers. These individuals had previously been identified by the social work supervisor in each site. The survey instrument was reviewed by social work supervisors in each site prior to distribution. Social Worker Surveys, which were accompanied by a letter from the evaluation team, were given out and collected by the supervisors. The surveys were distributed while evaluators were reviewing social services case files in each site; therefore, social workers were given the opportunity to contact the evaluators on-site with any questions regarding the survey instrument. Each survey contained space for the social worker name, but was accompanied by a sealable envelope to ensure respondent confidentiality. Social work supervisors prompted social workers on two separate occasions to complete and return their surveys, which were forwarded to the evaluators upon completion. Social workers who had not worked with a CASA volunteer were asked to return the survey unanswered, but to indicate on the form that they had no experience with CASAs.

GAL Survey. Prior to survey distribution, the GAL Survey instrument was reviewed by the Chair of the Advisory Committee, who is also a GAL. GALs who had worked or may have worked with a CASA volunteer were identified by CASA program staff in each of the three evaluation sites. Surveys were mailed to each GAL, along with a letter which described the project and elicited participation. GALs were provided with a stamped, addressed envelope in which to return the survey.

### **File Review Data**

The third data source consisted of case file reviews of a random sample of CASA cases in the chosen evaluation sites: Lynchburg, Fairfax County, and Virginia Beach. Case lists were generated by these three CASA programs for CASA cases opened between July 1, 1991 and June 30, 1993 (FY92 and FY93). Cases were randomly selected based on the number of children involved and the fiscal year of assignment.

To gather the most complete description of each case, the evaluators reviewed CASA, Juvenile & Domestic Relations District Court, and local Department of Social Services or Department of Human Development (Child Protective Services and Foster Care) files. Each chief judge, social services director, and CASA program director was contacted directly to gain access to the files. In some instances, the locality required further authorization from the local City Attorney and/or the Virginia Department of Social Services before granting access. In the Fairfax site, four files had been transferred from the Juvenile District Court to the Circuit Court; reviewers gained access to these files and reviewed them as well.

The information collected from the court, CASA, and social services files covered a wide range of areas, including victim and abuser demographics, characteristics of the case, previous abuse history, family history variables, contacts with system participants, content of specific court

orders, and compliance information.<sup>2</sup> Upon examination of the available data, cases in which one of these three files was unavailable or missing were removed from the sample and replaced by another case. Cases in which one of the three files was not applicable (e.g., custody cases which often do not involve social services intervention) were included in the sample because the existing case data was judged to be complete.

Reviewers spent several weeks collecting data in each site. Recordkeeping strategies varied considerably across the three sites; therefore, it was sometimes very difficult or impossible to obtain the same information for each case. Individual CASA, court, and social services files required anywhere from a few minutes up to three full days to review. As a group, social services files were generally the most detailed and complex to review. The extent of documentation contained in CASA and court files varied widely across sites.

## V. RESULTS

### Interviews and Surveys of CASA Program Directors

#### **Director Interview Findings: Preliminary Data Collection**

The results described in this section were derived from interviews with 12 directors of established CASA programs. The Director Interview was primarily used to gather descriptive information on program policies and procedures, volunteer training, perceptions of CASA impact, and relationships with relevant courtroom participants such as judges, social workers, and GALs. The interviews were also helpful in establishing the nature of similarities and differences among programs. Given the CASA focus on program flexibility, the evaluators were interested in determining whether a small number of models of CASA programming exist. Although some similarities were in fact identified, these areas of program agreement were not strong enough to suggest distinct CASA program types. However, this information did allow us to determine the primary areas of program variability. These findings created a foundation for selecting subsequent in-depth study areas that were addressed in the survey and file review phases of the project. The most noteworthy areas of substantial variability were training and frequency of CASA assignment.

*Training:* Directors reported volunteer training policies in three areas: (1) pre-service classroom training, (2) courtroom training (which is recommended by state regulations but not required), and (3) in-service training. Minimum training requirements and the interpretation of regulations varied considerably across programs. For example, the number of required classroom training hours ranged from 22 (which is below the state regulated minimum of 25) to 45. Programs required about 30 hours of classroom training, on average.

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<sup>2</sup> Due to its length, the data collection form used in the file review activities is not included in this document; it may be obtained from the Department of Criminal Justice Services.

*Frequency of CASA Assignment:* Directors indicated considerable variability across (and within) programs in how often judges assigned CASAs to cases. Some directors reported high rates of assignment (100 percent of abuse/neglect cases) while others reported considerably lower frequencies (e.g., no court referrals for a few months). Program directors were most likely to characterize the CASA assignments by local judges as occurring “frequently.”

Director Interviews revealed two additional areas of significance to these programs. These areas, case monitoring and relationships with other professionals (judges, social workers, and GALs), showed some variability, but were most notable in their potential implications for programming.

*Case Monitoring:* At this point, case monitoring functions are state regulated only in the respect that they are one part of the CASA job description. Likewise, few programs had established guidelines directing how case monitoring functions are performed. For example, some programs reported having a written policy on how case monitoring should be conducted, but others had very limited or no guidelines. In addition, case monitoring is not a required topic of instruction in the existing volunteer training curriculum.

*Relationships with Case Professionals:* Directors were also asked to describe the quality of their relationship with judges, social workers, and GALs. Relationships with the judges were overwhelmingly described as “very good” or “excellent” (10 of 12 localities). The ratings of relationships with social workers were mixed, with seven programs suggesting “very good” or “excellent” relationships and four programs indicating slightly less satisfaction (“fair” or “equally good and poor”). A much higher number of programs indicated less satisfying relationships with GALs: seven rated these relationships as “fair” or “poor”.

The CASA directors were also asked to describe how their programs affected the children they serve. Directors from 11 programs identified CASA benefits in the following areas:

- *Information:* Eight directors believed that CASAs provide the court and other professionals with information regarding the case. They contended that CASAs can collect more information than social workers, in part, because CASAs have much smaller caseloads. According to directors, CASA information is objective, unaffected by state mandates, and influential in court decision-making.
- *Accountability:* Eight directors maintained that CASAs often serve as the “watchdog” by monitoring families and prodding other agencies to act. Due to small caseloads, CASAs were also believed to have more time available than social workers for case monitoring activities.
- *Support:* Support of and/or advocacy for the child was particularly stressed by seven directors, although support for the family, the court, and other professionals was also noted.

- Permanency Placement: CASAs were purported by five directors to facilitate permanency, that is, securing the child in a safe, permanent placement. Directors remarked that CASA intervention leads to more frequent terminations of parental rights, more frequent returns to home, and less time spent in out-of-home placements.
- Time: Four directors asserted that CASA intervention decreases the length of time that a case stays in the court system.
- Return to the System: CASAs were credited by three directors with decreasing the chance of a child returning to the purview of the court, either as a victim or as a juvenile offender.
- Cost: Two directors pointed out that a volunteer program like CASA is a cost-effective method of providing services.

Most directors also reported that case-specific recordkeeping requirements are fairly lenient. Directors generally indicated that volunteers are reluctant to spend time on the written documentation of activities; therefore, recordkeeping requirements are not perceived as realistically enforceable.

### **Director Survey Findings**

The Director surveys were designed to collect supplemental program-specific information. Seventeen of the 18 directors of CASA programs responded to the surveys. The key findings from the surveys were as follows:

#### **Training**

- Thirteen of 16 directors believed that some type of training should be established for CASA program directors.
- Two aspects of volunteer training, legal issues and community resources, were identified in the subsequent survey data as areas of concern (see Additional Survey Data beginning on p. 12); the required hours of training in these areas varied widely across programs (see table below).

<b>Range of Required Training Hours Across Programs</b>			
<b>Type of Training</b>	<b>Lowest # of Hours Required</b>	<b>Highest # of Hours Required</b>	<b>Average # of Hours Required Across Programs</b>
<i>Legal</i>			
Classroom	3	35	11.2
Field	0	12	4.7
<i>Resources</i>			
Classroom	1	12	4.6
Field	0	12	0.4

### Activities

- Fundraising, paperwork, and quarterly reports were frequently noted as activities that required too much time (i.e., take time away from other activities that are more productive).
- Volunteer supervision, public relations, and volunteer training were felt to warrant more attention than directors are currently able to give them.

### Other Professionals' Expectations of CASA

- Directors suggested that judges expect information, recommendations (in most localities), and monitoring from CASA volunteers.
- In addition to information, social workers were seen as expecting support and assistance from CASAs.
- GALs were primarily viewed as expecting information from CASA volunteers.

### Outlook of the CASA Program

- All directors were "somewhat satisfied" to "very satisfied" with the frequency of CASA referrals to their programs.
- Overall satisfaction with the types of referrals was fairly positive, although there was some desire by directors to increase the number of abuse/neglect referrals.
- Directors cited funding availability as their primary concern with the future of the program, particularly given the Virginia Law Foundation's recent withdrawal of monetary support for program start-up. They were also interested in simplifying database management and reducing duplicative statistical reporting requirements.

### Program Interaction

- Virginia CASA programs know little about one another and seem to have limited interaction.
- Ten of 17 directors indicated that they would be interested in having more interaction with other programs.
- Four programs were identified by more than one other program as their primary resource when problems or questions arise: Lynchburg (cited by 5 programs), Virginia Beach (3), Hanover (2), and Rappahannock (2).

### **Discussion: Director Interview and Survey Data**

A review of program policies and procedures revealed considerable variability across programs. Program agreement on these issues was not strong enough to suggest the existence of CASA program types. In general, program administration is state-regulated to allow for local program flexibility. Consequently, program structures may vary based on local needs and basic regulations may be open to interpretation by local directors.

Data are rather sparse for these programs, as reported by the directors. Although state regulations direct the documentation and reporting of CASA program data (e.g., number of volunteers, number of cases served, etc.), few requirements exist at the local level for case-specific CASA recordkeeping, partially because directors are sensitive to the fact that CASAs are volunteer workers. In addition to funding availability, database management difficulties and duplicative statistical reporting requirements were reported as primary concerns of the directors.

Directors are fairly satisfied with the amount and type of referrals they currently receive from judges, but some indicated an interest in increasing the frequency of abuse/neglect referrals. They perceive judges, social workers, and GALs as expecting the CASA program to provide increased information. Directors agree that information provision is one of the most important impacts of their program. However, they do cite other impacts, including effects on long-term outcomes such as permanency placement and returns to the social services/court system.

## **Additional Survey Data**

### **CASA Volunteer Survey**

CASA Volunteer Surveys were mailed to 503 CASA volunteers in 12 established CASA programs. A total of 207 volunteers responded (41%). The percentage of volunteers responding varied widely across sites with a low of 17% to a high of 61%. Survey results are discussed in three areas: (1) volunteer profile and experience, (2) relationships with other professionals, and (3) advantages of the CASA program.

#### **Volunteer Profile and Experience**

For the most part, volunteer respondents were white (89%), female (87%), and fairly well educated (69% had graduated from college or attended graduate school). Five programs had no male respondents and four programs showed no non-white respondents. The largest number of volunteers fell between the ages of 30 and 39 (29%). The average age of volunteers was 46, with 7% under age 29 and 17% over age 60. Regarding CASA caseload, 94% of the respondents indicated handling three or fewer cases in the past calendar year. The average length of time as a CASA volunteer was 2.3 years.

#### **Relationships with Other Professionals**

The following findings were noted regarding CASA relationships with judges, social workers, and GALs:

- 94% of the volunteers described the relationships with judges as “generally good” or “excellent” (average rating = 4.5 on a 5-point scale).
- CASA volunteers rated relationships with social workers as primarily “generally good” or “excellent” (71% combined); however, 26% rated these relationships as “equally good and bad” (average rating = 3.8).
- Relationships with GALs were likewise rated fairly positively (60% as “generally good” or “excellent”); however, a greater percentage of respondents rated these relationships as “equally good and bad” (24%) or “generally poor” (12%) (average rating = 3.6).

#### **Advantages of the CASA Program**

CASAs also discussed their perceptions of advantages of the CASA program. Volunteers felt that the primary benefit of their program was the support and/or advocacy provided to the child. Volunteers also frequently noted that CASAs are able to provide more intensive case monitoring than social workers. In addition, some CASAs noted cost-effectiveness as a program benefit.



## Judge Survey

Judges in the 12 established CASA program jurisdictions were contacted by phone to participate in this survey. Of the 43 judges contacted, 38 responded (34 by phone, four by mail), resulting in a response rate of 88%. Important findings from these surveys are discussed below in terms of: (1) use of the CASA program, (2) satisfaction with the CASA program, and (3) advantages and disadvantages of the CASA program.

### Use of the CASA Program

- 24% of the judges reported assigning CASAs to fewer than one-fourth of their abuse/neglect cases, 39% assigned CASAs in one-fourth to three-fourths of these cases, and 36% assigned CASAs in over three-fourths of their abuse/neglect cases.
- Most judges reported assigning CASAs to less than 10% of their custody and CHINS cases.
- The case factors that lead a judge to consider assigning a CASA included a volatile family situation, age of the child, and the need for victim support beyond what social services or the Court Services Unit can provide.
- Judges did not assign CASAs to cases they considered to be “simple and straightforward.”

### Satisfaction with the CASA Program

- 87% of the judges rated the information provided by CASAs as “very useful,” and 70% agreed that CASAs “always” or “often” provided information not otherwise available.
- 78% reported being “very” satisfied with the outcomes of CASA cases; an additional 16% reported being “somewhat” satisfied with the outcomes of CASA cases.
- 54% of the judges said that their satisfaction with the outcomes of CASA cases was higher than it was with non-CASA cases.
- 58% reported that CASA involvement had a positive impact on the efficiency of the court.

### Advantages and Disadvantages of CASA Involvement

When asked about the ways in which CASA intervention was beneficial, the judges most often mentioned providing information and giving support to the child. A majority of judges (80%) felt that CASAs are able to provide more intensive case monitoring than social workers. Other less frequently mentioned benefits included the amount of time CASAs could spend on a case, their positive impact on decision-making, the “watchdog” function that they perform with regard to monitoring other agencies in the system, and the cost-effectiveness of the CASA program.

Twenty-nine percent (n=11) of the judges reported personal knowledge of a case in which CASA involvement had been detrimental; these instances primarily involved CASAs becoming over-involved with a case and losing objectivity. When asked if CASA intervention might hypothetically be detrimental, 61% said yes, citing similar reasons. In addition, several judges indicated a perception that CASAs lack expertise in legal matters.

When asked for suggestions regarding the future of the CASA program, judges generally wanted more volunteers (31%), more funding for the CASA program (19%), and expansion of the program to include more custody and CHINS (11%) cases.

## Social Worker Survey

Surveys were distributed to 224 social workers across the three evaluation sites. The overall response rate was 38% (n=86). Key findings are given in four primary areas: (1) social worker caseloads and experience with CASA, (2) satisfaction with the CASA program, (3) relationships with CASAs, and (4) advantages and disadvantages of CASA involvement.

### Social Worker Caseloads and Experience with CASA

The responding social workers had been employed as social workers for an average of 14 years. Social workers had participated in an average of 3.8 CASA cases in the past calendar year, representing an average of 8.9 children. Most social workers had worked with CASAs for three or more years.

### Satisfaction with the CASA Program

- Social workers generally supported the program, with 82% stating that they were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the outcomes of CASA cases;
- 19% of all respondents described this level of satisfaction as “slightly higher ” to “much higher” than their satisfaction with non-CASA cases.
- 13% of all respondents reported satisfaction levels “slightly lower” to “much lower” than those in non-CASA cases.

### Relationships with CASAs

When asked to describe the nature of their relationship with the CASA program, responses were generally positive, with 73% rating the relationship as “generally good” or “excellent.”

### Advantages and Disadvantages of CASA Involvement

When queried for benefits of the CASA program, social workers noted increased information and support services most frequently (32% and 34%, respectively). Some social workers also indicated that CASAs may have more time to collect information and monitor family situations. Other benefits, such as providing a “watchdog” role or influencing the time spent on a case, were identified less frequently. Social workers suggested the child, the family, and other professionals as the most likely parties to benefit from CASA intervention.

Although the respondents were not asked to relate actual observations of detrimental CASA involvement, they were asked to report any ways in which CASA involvement might be potentially detrimental. Over 70% reported areas of concern; the most frequently mentioned concerns were lack of expertise/professionalism (specifically in legal knowledge and community resource familiarity), adversarial relationships with social services, potential for bias (e.g., over-involvement), and role ambiguity. Seven social workers could not think of any areas of potential detriments.

Social workers felt that two areas were most important to address in considering the future of the CASA program: training and role clarification. Working collaboratively with social services and staffing were also considered to be important considerations.

## **Guardian Ad Litem Survey**

Surveys were distributed by mail to 56 GALs in the three evaluation sites. Twenty-six GALs responded, yielding a response rate of 46%. Survey results are discussed in four areas: (1) experience with CASAs, (2) relationships with CASAs, (3) satisfaction with the CASA program, and (4) advantages and disadvantages of CASA involvement.

### **Experience with CASAs**

Most respondents had worked with CASAs for more than three years (76%). The GALs' average caseload of CASA-assisted cases in the previous calendar year was 7.8.

### **Relationships with CASAs**

GALs overwhelmingly described their relationships with the CASA program as “generally good” to “excellent” (88%).

### **Satisfaction with the CASA Program**

- GALs indicated high levels of satisfaction with the outcomes of CASA cases (84%).
- About one-third of the GALs (n=9) described their satisfaction level relative to non-CASA cases as “much higher.”
- When asked to rate the usefulness of the information that CASAs provide to the GALs, 85% rated it as “very useful.”

### **Advantages and Disadvantages of CASA Involvement**

All GAL respondents mentioned information provision as a benefit of the CASA program. The most commonly cited beneficiaries of CASA intervention included the GAL, the court, and the child.

When asked about potential detriments of the program, 30% were concerned with potential bias, while others pointed to a lack of expertise (particularly in the areas of legal expertise and community resource knowledge) that could be potentially detrimental. Twenty-nine percent of the respondents could think of no ways that CASA intervention could be detrimental.

## **Volunteer, Judge, Social Worker, and GAL Surveys: Role Perceptions**

All survey respondents were asked to provide their understanding of the CASA volunteer, social worker, and GAL roles in juvenile court cases. Although the area of emphasis differed, all groups viewed the CASA as supporting the child, and collecting and providing information. Judges and CASA workers additionally indicated that acting as the “watchdog” (i.e., prodding others to act) was another important role. Judges, social workers, and GALs indicated that one role of the CASA is to assist other professionals (e.g., reporting to court and providing support).

The role of the social workers was perceived by the CASA volunteers and judges to primarily involve representation of the state interest of family reunification. Judges and social workers also frequently cited the social worker roles of investigating, evaluating information, and providing services. Social workers additionally perceived their own role as including protecting

the child and monitoring case progress. CASAs also discussed the social workers' role as an information provider to the CASA.

The role of the GAL was consistently defined by all groups as providing legal advice and representing the child's best interests in legal proceedings. However, many respondents indicated that the GAL's role is minimal and that their usefulness in these cases is questionable. Several respondents mentioned that GALs come to court hearings to argue the case without ever meeting the child.

### **Discussion: Additional Survey Data**

The survey data provided a detailed view of how courtroom participants and CASA volunteers view the program. Overall satisfaction with the program was high across judges, social workers, and GALs. These three groups pointed out many positive aspects of the program, but most frequently cited increased information as a benefit. Most judges and many other respondents also suggested that CASAs are able to provide more intensive case monitoring than social workers. Other commonly mentioned benefits were the support of the child and assistance to professionals. These reported benefits corresponded closely with the directors' assessments of the types of assistance CASA is expected to offer.

CASA volunteer ratings of their relationships with judges, social workers, and GALs were very similar to the ratings given by the program directors. The relationships with judges were described very positively. Based on social worker and CASA volunteer responses, relationships with social workers were also generally positive, although many instances of "mixed" feelings were noted. However, social workers who were more pleased with this relationship clearly rated satisfaction with outcomes in CASA cases more positively. Relationships with the GALs were rated lower than any other relationship by CASAs. Conversely, GALs rated their relationships with CASAs very positively.

When asked about potential detriments of the program, judges and social workers emphasized CASA bias or over-involvement. Although many noted this concern, few had actually seen this type of problem occur. Courtroom professionals were concerned that over-involvement by the CASA may increase the stress felt by the child upon termination of the CASA worker's involvement. Judges and social workers stated that CASA children may become very attached to the worker, whose connection is sometimes abruptly ended.

Although the CASA volunteers, judges, social workers, and GALs showed general agreement on perceptions of volunteer roles, role distinctions do not always appear to be clear in practice. Social workers particularly noted a problem with role confusion. Specifically, they often saw CASA as desiring an authoritative role over social services, which sometimes led to decision-making without social worker input. They consequently asked for clarification from social services supervisors or judges regarding the CASA role. CASA volunteers revealed a somewhat different view. CASA volunteers, CASA directors, and judges suggested system monitoring (or acting as the "watchdog") as an important benefit of the program. According to CASA volunteers, social workers have tremendous caseloads and few resources, thus the CASA is

believed to prevent children from “falling through the cracks.” This CASA responsibility seems to result in one of two attitudes toward social workers. CASAs may view this “watchdog” role as a way of assisting the social worker, that is, providing a helpful reminder to deal with particular issues. On the other hand, they may consider this role necessary due to perceptions of social worker incompetence, which may lead to an authoritative or even adversarial approach.

In addition, several training issues were raised throughout the surveys. Legal training and community resources were particularly suggested by social workers, GALs, and CASA volunteers as areas where more volunteer training is desirable. Judges, social workers, and GALs emphasized the CASAs’ lack of expertise in legal matters, stressing that it sometimes led to unrealistic expectations from the volunteers. In addition, other professionals were concerned regarding the lack of cultural diversity in the volunteer base and the need for more extensive cultural diversity training. They further suggested that CASAs come from very different backgrounds than their clients, and consequently may have difficulty understanding the life circumstances of these families.

Finally, the CASA volunteers, CASA directors, judges, and social workers were consistent in how they defined the GAL’s role, but seemed dissatisfied with how GALs are realistically functioning. Most respondents stated that the GAL contributes very little to these cases. A general sense of uncertainty regarding the GAL’s usefulness was evident from these data.

### **File Review Data**

As stated previously, the evaluation team chose Lynchburg, Fairfax County, and Virginia Beach as the intensive evaluation sites. The Lynchburg Area Program handles cases from Lynchburg City and four surrounding counties. Only Lynchburg City case files were used in the review process for two reasons: (1) the bulk of this program’s caseload comes from the Lynchburg City Juvenile District Court; therefore, the number of other cases would have been too small to meaningfully assess potential county/city differences, and (2) the logistical effort involved in obtaining authorization to examine relevant case files in the four counties was not justified by the small number of cases to which we would have gained access. Results from this locality should be interpreted with this selection restriction in mind. The Fairfax County and Virginia Beach programs only serve cases within their respective localities.

Of the 78 total cases in the sample, twenty-four cases were reviewed from the Virginia Beach and Lynchburg case lists and thirty cases were chosen from the Fairfax site (as it is a considerable larger program). The data is reviewed either by case (that is, by sibling group) or by victim.

### **Descriptive Findings**

#### **Client and Case Profile**

The client, in this case the child or victim, was defined as an abused/neglected child, a child in need of services, or a child who is the subject of a custody battle and has been appointed a CASA

by the court. The 78 cases reviewed in the three study sites involved a total of 164 victims. Descriptive information for these victims is contained in the table below.

<b>Descriptors of Children and Cases in CASA Cases</b>				
<b>Demographics and Case Descriptors</b>	<b>Percentage of Children by Evaluation Site</b>			<b>Total Percentage across sites</b>
	<b>Fairfax (n=58)</b>	<b>Lynchburg (n=51)</b>	<b>Virginia Beach (n=55)</b>	
<b><i>Gender</i></b>				
Male	50.0	47.1	47.3	48.2
Female	50.0	52.9	52.7	51.8
<b><i>Race</i></b>				
White	56.9	29.4	65.5	51.2
African- American	32.8	66.7	23.6	40.2
Hispanic	10.3	0.0	0.0	3.7
Other	0.0	3.9	10.9	4.9
<b><i>Age</i></b>				
0-1 year	31.0	23.5	18.0	24.5
2-4 years	17.2	23.5	18.0	19.5
5-10 years	27.6	33.3	42.0	34.0
11-17 years	24.1	19.6	22.0	22.0
<b><i># of Victims Per Case</i></b>				
One	53.3	50.0	29.2	44.9
Two	20.0	20.8	33.3	24.4
Three	16.7	16.7	25.0	19.2
Four or More	9.9	12.5	12.5	11.5
<b><i>Residence at Case Opening</i></b>				
Both natural parents	36.2	9.8	7.3	18.3
Mother	51.7	82.4	58.2	63.4
Father	10.3	2.0	20.0	11.0
Relative	0.0	3.9	14.5	6.1
Other	1.7	2.0	0.0	1.2
<b><i>Initial Petition Type</i></b>				
Abuse/Neglect	93.1	90.2	47.3	76.8
Custody	5.2	2.0	43.5	17.1
CHINS	1.7	5.9	1.8	3.0
Other	0.0	2.0	7.3	3.0
<b><i>Victims with Previous Abuse/Neglect Findings</i></b>	27.6	70.6	25.5	40.2

\* Box totals may not always total 100% due to rounding.

For the sample as a whole, about three-quarters of the initial petitions cited charges of abuse/neglect. Further analysis of these cases showed that physical neglect was the largest single category of charges filed: 40% of abuse/neglect cases involved physical neglect. The three sites differed in their percentage of case types. Specifically, Virginia Beach had a significantly greater percentage of custody cases included in the sample than the other sites. Virginia Beach also had a higher percentage of cases with more than one victim.

Male and female victims were about equally represented in the sample, as were whites and non-whites. Lynchburg, however, had a higher percentage of African-Americans in the sample than Fairfax or Virginia Beach. The samples were representative of client populations in these sites.

#### Abuser Profile

The 67 abuse/neglect cases reviewed involved 88 abusers; 26.8% of the victims were abused by more than one person. The table below presents the abuser demographics.

<b>Descriptors of Abusers in CASA Cases</b>				
<b>Demographics</b>	<b>Percentage of Abusers by Evaluation Site</b>			<b>Total % across sites</b>
	<b>Fairfax</b>	<b>Lynchburg</b>	<b>Virginia Beach</b>	
<b><i>Gender</i></b>				
Male	44.4	21.7	44.8	37.5
Female	55.6	78.3	55.2	62.5
<b><i>Race</i></b>				
White	53.3	34.8	57.7	49.4
African-American	36.7	65.2	34.6	44.3
Hispanic	10.0	0.0	7.7	6.3
<b><i>Age</i></b>				
12 - 19 years	6.5	10.0	9.1	8.2
20 - 29 years	32.3	40.0	40.9	37.0
30 - 39 years	41.9	35.0	36.4	38.4
40 - 49 years	16.1	10.0	9.1	12.3
50 - 59 years	3.2	5.0	4.5	4.1
<b><i>Marital Status</i></b>				
Single	21.4	28.6	30.4	26.4
Married	50.0	42.9	34.8	43.1
Sep./Divorced	25.0	28.6	34.8	29.2
Widowed	3.6	0.0	0.0	1.4
<b><i>Abuser</i></b>				
Mother	55.6	78.3	51.8	60.2
Father	30.6	17.4	24.2	25.0
Mom's Boyfriend	2.8	0.0	13.8	5.7
Step-Father	8.3	4.3	3.4	5.7
Other	2.8	0.0	6.8	3.4

Box totals may not always total 100% due to rounding.

Abusers were most likely to be unmarried women between the ages of 20 and 39. In terms of locality differences, Lynchburg had a higher proportion of female abusers and African-American abusers than the other two sites. Abusers in Virginia Beach were the least likely of the three to be married; mothers' boyfriends comprised a much greater percentage of the abusers in this locality.

#### Additional Abuse/Neglect Findings and Petitions Filed

Reviewers also gathered information on the types of additional petitions filed, as well as additional findings of abuse/neglect made by social services during the course of the case. Information gathered regarding the types of petitions filed is summarized below:

<b>Initial Petition Type</b>	<b># of Victims Initiated on This Type</b>	<b># of Additional Abuse/Neglect Petitions</b>	<b># of Additional Custody Petitions</b>	<b># of Additional CHINS Petitions</b>	<b># of Additional Other Petitions</b>
<i>Abuse/Neglect</i>	126	18	54	4	40
<i>Custody</i>	28	1	5	0	6
<i>CHINS</i>	5	0	0	2	7
<i>Other</i>	5	1	2	1	2

Other petitions include terminations of parental rights, juvenile offender petitions, temporary detention orders, and shelter care orders. A total of 24 victims had parents whose parental rights were ultimately terminated; 18 of these children had entered the court system on abuse/neglect petitions and six had entered on custody petitions. Eight victims subsequently had juvenile offender petitions filed against them.

When cases entered the court system on a custody petition, abuse/neglect was frequently discovered to be a factor at a later point in the process. For 11 of the 28 children involved in custody cases, social services made "founded" or "reason to suspect" abuse/neglect findings during the course of the case; however, these cases did not result in abuse/neglect petitions because the children were already under the purview of the court. (In fact, many of these children were already out of parental custody.) An additional five of these 28 children had abuse/neglect allegations cited as a part of their custody proceedings. None of these cases resulted in either social services abuse/neglect findings or abuse/neglect petitions. Of cases initiated through abuse/neglect or other petitions, six children had additional abuse/neglect findings during the course of their case proceedings that did not lead to additional abuse/neglect petitions.

#### Family History Variables

The evaluators were interested in documenting potentially detrimental factors in the family situation. Personal history information was gathered for the victims, biological mothers, biological fathers, and other relevant parties (such as the mother's boyfriend, etc.). These variables shed some light on the life circumstances surrounding the children in these cases.



The table below presents this information for the 164 child victims. Children having more than one factor present are included in the count for each relevant category. Children with disabilities are those who were described as having some type of chronic illness, disabling illness, or physical limitation. This category would include chronic conditions (e.g., sickle cell anemia), sensory impairments (e.g., hearing impairments) and/or injuries related to abuse that caused health problems (e.g., prenatal drug complications). Incidences of mental illness were documented when the case reviewers judged them as relatively severe, that is, involving a diagnosis and/or some type of formal treatment.

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Applicable Victims</b>	
	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage of Victims</b>
<i>Criminal Activity</i>	4	2.4
<i>Disabilities</i>	73	50.0
<i>Intellectual Limitations</i>	8	4.9
<i>Mental Illness</i>	36	21.9
<i>Prenatal Alcohol</i>	2	1.2
<i>Prenatal Drug</i>	14	8.5
<i>Previously Abused</i>	66	40.2
<i>School Problems - Academic</i>	31	18.9
<i>School Problems - Behavioral</i>	29	17.7

As the table shows, half of the children in these cases have some type of documented disability. About 20% of these victims have other serious problems, such as mental illness, or school difficulties. Over 40% of these victims had previously been abused.

The next table presents personal history factors for the parents of the 164 children. The percentages shown in the table are based on the total number of cases (78) because up to 5 biological fathers may have been involved in the lives of one mother/sibling group. Information was often unavailable for many of the fathers who were not participating in their childrens' lives. For this reason, each case (defined here as a sibling group) is affirmatively scored in a category if one or more biological fathers applicable to that case fit into the category.

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Percentage of Applicable Parents</b>	
	<b>Mothers (n=78)</b>	<b>Fathers (n=78)</b>
<i>Alcohol Abuse</i>	41.0	25.6
<i>Criminal Activity</i>	32.1	37.1
<i>Disabilities</i>	9.0	9.0
<i>Drug Abuse</i>	39.7	21.8
<i>Intellectual Limitations</i>	9.0	2.6
<i>Mental Illness</i>	37.2	14.1
<i>Victim of Abuse/Neglect</i>	28.2	7.7
<i>Victim of Domestic Violence</i>	46.2	0.0

Like victims, severe problems were documented for many of the parents in these families. About 40% of the mothers in the sample had experienced drug abuse, alcohol abuse, or mental illness difficulties. Almost half of the mothers in the sample had been victims of domestic violence. Among fathers, criminal activity, drug abuse, and substance abuse were the most commonly documented problems. It is important to note that family history variables, particularly for parents, are very likely to be underestimates because the available records did not systematically document the presence or absence of such issues. In addition, information is often not available on absentee parents, a phenomenon that is quite prevalent in this sample.

### **Impact Analysis**

Evaluators were unable to examine a comparison group of cases for which there was no CASA involvement; therefore, comparisons could not be made between CASA cases in the review sample and a similar group of cases without a CASA. However, detailed information was collected on the cases in which a CASA was assigned. By examining data relevant to victim impact or outcomes, the evaluation attempted to address the effects of the CASA program on case processing variables, client outcomes, and courtroom decision-making. The data collected for these analyses include documentation of case chronology for the court, social services, and the CASA program; the number of CASA reports submitted to the court; the numbers and types of contacts between CASAs, social workers, and other parties for each case; the numbers and types of recommendations made to the court by CASAs and social workers; compliance with court orders; types of final placement outcomes; households of final placements; and subsequent activity in the system. This section presents our findings for each of these impact variables.

In addressing impact, it is important to note that social services, court, and CASA interventions are chronologically distinct, but do overlap one another. Social services files are opened when a complaint of child abuse and/or neglect is filed with the agency. At that point, a social services investigation ensues, which may be followed by social services intervention if the complaint is “founded” or “reason to suspect.” If the social services agency determines that court intervention is necessary, the agency files a petition with the Juvenile Court. Custody and CHINS petitions may also involve social services intervention, but are most frequently initiated by an independent party. When a petition is filed, either by social services or by an independent party, the court opens a case. A CASA may be assigned, at the discretion of the presiding judge, at any time after the petition is filed. The CASA case opens when it is assigned by the CASA program. Case closing procedures vary tremendously across agencies and localities. Regarding closing cases, CASA and social services programs are generally directed to close cases by the court; they may be released from a case by the court or may request that the court release them from a case, if they feel their work is complete. Court cases are closed at the discretion of the presiding judge. Case files from the three participating agencies are rarely closed simultaneously.

### **CASA Case Length**

CASA case length is defined as the amount of time CASA had an “open” status on the case, that is, the time period from CASA assignment to CASA closure of the case. Length was computed on cases that had been closed at the CASA program (indicating that CASA is no longer involved

in the case), and also for cases showing a current case open status (current CASA involvement). Length could not be computed for five of the 129 children in cases closed at CASA due to missing data. The following findings were notable regarding CASA case length:

- Of 124 victims in cases closed at CASA, the average length of CASA intervention was approximately 17 months.
- Of the 35 victims in cases open at CASA, CASA intervention length averaged 28 months to date.
- Forty children (31%) had more than one CASA volunteer, either due to volunteer turnover or multiple CASA coverage (generally due to pairing a “veteran” CASA with a “new” CASA).
- The average length of time from court order to CASA assignment was three weeks.
- The time from court order to CASA assignment was considerably longer in Fairfax (7 weeks) than in the other sites, probably because this program has a waiting list for CASA clients.

#### Court Case Length

Court case length refers to time spent in the court system, that is, the time period from the first court proceeding to the last court proceeding on the case. Length was computed on cases that were “closed” to the court system (e.g., taken off the docket, no further activity, etc.), and also for cases showing current or pending court activity (“open” status). Notable findings relative to this variable included:

- The average number of court proceedings for all closed cases was eight.
- In cases closed to the court, victims were in the court system an average of 15 months.
- The average length that open cases had been in the court system was 33.5 months.

#### Total Case Length

Total case length is defined as the time period from the first court petition to the permanency date. Permanency is defined as a case being closed at the court, CASA, and social services; this indicates that intervention with the family has been terminated by all parties. This analysis examined the subset of 48 cases where a permanency date had been achieved. Key findings on total case length were:

- The average length from the initial petition to an abuse/neglect finding by the court (if applicable) was six months.
- The average time from petition to final placement (that is, physical placement in the home where permanency is ultimately achieved) was 7.5 months.
- The average time from petition to permanency (defined as a case being closed at CASA, court, and social services) was about 2.5 years.
- The percentage of time CASA spent on a case averaged 78% of the total case length.
- CASA was involved on 95-100% of the total case length in twenty-one percent of the cases.

#### CASA Reports to Courts

For the most part, CASAs relay information to the court through the use of the CASA report. Evaluators reviewed cases that had been closed by the CASA program in the three evaluation sites to examine the nature of this reporting. Activity had been discontinued (closed) by the CASA program for 129 of the 164 victims noted. Several findings were noteworthy:

- Twelve (9%) had no record of a CASA report submission in the file.

- The number of report submissions for each victim ranged from zero to six, with the average number of reports per victim at 1.9.
- Virginia Beach had a slightly higher average number of CASA reports per victim (2.4 reports) than the other two sites, even though the average length of time CASAs spent on a case in this locality was shorter (55.2 weeks).

We also examined the acceptance of the CASA recommendations by the court. Unlike all other CASA programs in the state, the Fairfax CASA program is not permitted to make specific recommendations to the court; this site was, therefore, removed from this analysis. The data revealed a total of 138 CASA reports that could be matched, by victim and date, to specific court orders. To assess the Courts' apparent agreement with these orders, we attempted to match each CASA recommendation with a corresponding court order. When every CASA recommendation in the report had a matching court order, the report was coded as "fully incorporated" into the court orders. If some, but not all, CASA recommendations had matching court orders, the report was coded as "partially incorporated" into the court orders. The evaluators discovered that:

- Of the 138 reports, 55% were partially incorporated into the court orders and 27% were fully incorporated into the court orders.
- No differences in recommendation acceptance were found on the basis of case type.
- Virginia Beach had a higher percentage of cases where the CASA recommendations were fully incorporated into the court orders (32% versus 17% in Lynchburg).

#### CASA and Social Worker Contacts

One of the claimed benefits of CASA intervention is that CASAs are able to make more frequent and intensive contacts with relevant case participants (e.g., victims, abusers, therapists, etc.), as compared to social services. To examine this claim, the evaluators reviewed contact documentation for CASAs and social workers. The completeness of these data are unknown, partially because CASAs and social workers vary considerably in the comprehensiveness of their recordkeeping. Due to the variable nature of CASA reporting, data on the frequency of CASA contacts was available in very few cases, some of which were custody cases that did not involve social services intervention. For this reason, frequency of contacts did not appear to be a viable measure for this analysis.

However, CASA reports do routinely list the persons that the CASA has contacted in reference to the case. In addition, most social services programs do have minimum case-specific recordkeeping requirements which typically include the social worker's dictation of case progress. This dictation provides a running log of the social worker's activities and actual contacts on the case. With these data, researchers were able to reasonably assess the breadth of CASA and social worker contacts, that is, identifying the different groups of persons that CASAs and social workers interacted with concerning each case. Evaluators were also able to determine the number of cases in which CASAs and social workers contacted the same or different groups.

To conduct this comparison analysis, evaluators used 46 cases (again, defined as sibling groups) in which the contact information for both CASAs and social workers was judged to be complete. The table below indicates the number of cases in which CASAs and social workers (SWs) had contact with various groups; this information is divided into the investigatory and monitoring phases of the case management.

Number of Cases in which Groups were Contacted by CASAs and Social Workers in Each Phase of Case Management*						
Group Contacted	Investigation - Contact With:			Monitoring - Contact With:		
	CASA & SWs	CASA Only	SWs Only	CASA & SWs	CASA Only	SWs Only
<i>Victims</i>	24	13	6	32	2	11
<i>Abusers</i>	21	6	14	30	0	10
<i>Non-abusing Parents</i>	16	5	1	14	2	13
<i>Other Family</i>	10	4	21	12	5	20
<i>Foster Care Family</i>	7	4	8	16	1	6
<i>GAL</i>	3	19	2	12	8	10
<i>Other Attys.</i>	2	5	3	8	1	26
<i>Other Legal</i>	8	6	17	9	2	22
<i>Psychologists</i>	12	3	11	21	3	18
<i>Medical</i>	9	3	14	7	3	21
<i>Education</i>	6	14	4	12	1	16

These data suggested that both CASAs and social workers frequently contacted victims, abusers, and other family members. However, the findings from this analysis were perhaps most useful for examining areas of dissimilar activities. For cases indicating areas of contact by only the CASA or only the social worker, the key findings were:

- During the investigation, CASAs were more likely than social workers to have contact with the victim, while social workers were more likely to contact the abuser and other family members.
- During the investigation, CASAs were more likely than social workers to have contact with GALs, while social workers more frequently had contact with other types of legal professionals (e.g., court, police, etc.).
- During the investigation, social workers were more likely than CASAs to have contact with psychologists and medical professionals.
- Social workers were much more likely than CASAs to have contact with all groups during the monitoring phase.

#### CASA and Social Worker Recommendations

Evaluators also analyzed the number of recommendations made by the CASAs and social workers on each case. Like contact data, a comparative analysis of these recommendations is somewhat limited by the comprehensiveness of documentation. CASA recommendations to the court are explicitly presented in the CASA report. However, data regarding social services recommendations to the court may not be as clearly identifiable. These recommendations may be stated in the social worker's dictation, in other supporting documents (such as the foster care

\* A total of 46 cases were examined for this analysis.

plan), or they may be contained in the court's documentation of the proceeding. For the purposes of our analysis of recommendations data, the evaluators used only cases in which they judged the information to be reasonably complete. However, it is also possible for social workers to orally communicate recommendations directly to the court or indirectly through the social services attorney; these recommendations may not always be included in the written documentation of the case. For these reasons, data for social worker recommendations may be underreported due to variations in social worker documentation. Consequently, results from this comparative analysis should be interpreted with caution.

The Fairfax program was again excluded from this analysis. Recommendations were coded as primarily relevant to either the victim (e.g., psychological evaluation), the abuser (e.g., parenting classes), the family (e.g., family therapy), or the system (e.g., time until next court review). Across the 24 cases for which CASA and social worker comparison information was available, 60 victims and 28 abusers were involved. The table below shows the number of recommendations by type and locality.

<b>Number of Recommendations by Type and Locality</b>						
<b>Rec. for Who?</b>	<b>Lynchburg</b>		<b>Virginia Beach</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<b>CASA</b>	<b>Social Worker</b>	<b>CASA</b>	<b>Social Worker</b>	<b>CASA</b>	<b>Social Worker</b>
<i>Victim</i>	187	57	111	74	218	131
<i>Abuser</i>	50	92	48	44	98	136
<i>Family</i>	7	9	13	4	20	13
<i>System</i>	41	8	30	13	71	21

This information can be summarized as follows:

- In total, the number of CASA recommendations was considerably larger than the number of social worker recommendations.
- In both sites, CASAs made a significantly greater number of recommendations relevant to the victim and the system (e.g., time until next court review) than did social workers.
- In Lynchburg, social workers made almost twice as many recommendations relevant to the abuser than did CASAs, while in Virginia Beach, CASAs made a slightly greater number of recommendations regarding abusers.
- Overall, few recommendations targeted the family; in Lynchburg, social workers made family recommendations slightly more than CASAs, while in Virginia Beach, CASAs made considerably more family recommendations than did social workers.

#### Compliance with Court Orders

Data on compliance with the Courts' orders for services were also obtained from the case files in Fairfax, Lynchburg, and Virginia Beach. Compliance included either full compliance, when all of the Courts' orders were followed, or partial compliance, when the parties complied with only some of the orders (e.g., completed parenting classes, but did not attend anger management) or complied with the orders in part (e.g., attended most of the required parenting classes). A total of 48 closed cases involving 90 victims and 74 abusers were included in this analysis. Of the

victims, 44% had no court orders for services, while 20% of the abusers had no applicable court orders. The table below shows the percentages of victims and abusers who had court-ordered services which were complied with completely, partially, or not at all. (Note that, with the exception of older children, it is not the victims themselves who fail to comply with orders, but the parents or guardians who are required to carry out the Courts' wishes. However, data are presented to represent the individual who should have received the service.)

<b>Victim and Abuser Compliance with Court Orders</b>			
<b>Order Given For:</b>	<b>% Who Complied with No Court Orders</b>	<b>% Who Complied with Some Court Orders</b>	<b>% Who Complied with All Court Orders</b>
<i>Victims</i>	20.4	20.4	59.2
<i>Abusers</i>	27.1	45.8	27.1

Almost 60% of the victims had court orders for services which were complied with completely; 20%, however, had court orders which were not complied with at all. Only 27% of the abusers complied with all of the court orders they received.

Percentages of individual compliance with court orders were also calculated from these data. These percentages were defined as the ratio of the number of court orders to which partial or total compliance was obtained to the total number of court orders issued. The compliance percentage for court orders which applied to the victims was 68%, and the court order compliance percentage for abusers was 52%. The evaluators found only one instance documented in the files of sanctions being applied to abusers or parents who failed to comply with court orders.

#### Placement

The table below shows permanent placement outcomes for the 48 closed cases (i.e., permanency achieved) included in this analysis. Categories for placement outcomes are mutually exclusive.

<b>Placement Outcome</b>	<b>Percentage of Victims with this Outcome</b>
<i>Never left home</i>	32
<i>Left home and returned</i>	21
<i>Left home and never returned</i>	32
<i>Left home and became emancipated</i>	2
<i>Custody switch to non-abusing parent</i>	12
<i>Custody switch to non-parent</i>	1

The following findings were noteworthy:

- Most children either never left home (32%) , or left home and never returned (32%).
- When the victim left home and returned, the average time out-of-home was just over 10 months.

- When the victim left home and never returned, the average time out-of-home until final placement was made was just under 6 months.

The next table shows the breakdown of final placement households and the respective primary caretakers.

<b>Final Placement Household</b>	<b>Percentage of Victims with this Final Placement</b>
<i>Mother &amp; Father</i>	13
<i>Mother; Mother &amp; others</i>	26
<i>Father; Father &amp; others</i>	27
<i>Relative</i>	27
<i>Permanent Foster Care/Adoption</i>	4
<i>Emancipated</i>	3

Children were most likely to ultimately reside with one natural parent (or one natural parent and other caretakers) or with another relative. Subsequent analyses revealed that 52% of the victims were permanently placed in households other than their original household. In terms of locality differences, victims in the Lynchburg site were most likely to change residences.

#### Subsequent Activity

The child or family's return to the system was also assessed as an impact measure. A case was considered to show subsequent activity if any child in the family was returned to the Court's attention for any reason after the three case files (court, CASA, and social services) were closed. Thus, only the 48 closed cases (i.e., permanency achieved) were used in this analysis. The follow-up period for identifying subsequent case activity extended from the time of the case closing to the time the evaluators reviewed the file. This period ranged from 2 months to 2.5 years. The types of subsequent activity found in these cases is shown in the table below. Only one of the applicable cases involved children in the family who had not been assigned to a CASA previously. Note that multiple types of activity may be applicable to one case or one child.

<b>Subsequent Activity</b>	<b>Total # of Cases</b>	<b>Total # of Children</b>
<i>Abuse/Neglect</i>	3	6
<i>Custody</i>	6	8
<i>CHINS</i>	2	3
<i>Juvenile Offender</i>	2	2
<i>Other</i>	2	2

The key findings from this analysis were:

- Of the 48 closed cases, 11 or 23% of the cases returned to the system during the follow-up period.
- Of the 48 closed cases, eight or 17% of the cases returned to the system in less than one year from the case permanency date.



- Twenty-two charges involving 15 children were subsequently filed in the 11 returned cases.
- A CASA was reappointed in four of these cases (three in Lynchburg, one in Fairfax).
- Three children were subsequently removed from the home; each had been removed and then returned to the home during the previous court action.
- Of the eight victims involved in subsequent custody disputes, seven had previous custody adjudications during the prior court involvement.

### **Discussion: File Review Findings**

As noted previously, the lack of a comparison group greatly limits our ability to draw conclusions about the impact of CASAs from these analyses. Moreover, the file review was limited to a relatively small number of cases in only three localities. With these caveats in mind, the file review allows us to make several observations which are relevant to the assessment of outcomes in CASA cases.

Judges reported that they assign CASAs to complicated cases; a review of the factors involved in these cases verifies this contention. In addition to child abuse/neglect issues (which were present in most instances), the families involved in these cases did appear to have many problems. Most of the victims had at least one major difficulty, for example, a physical disability, that undoubtedly affected family dynamics and adaptability. The abusers also had many problems, including mental illness, criminal behavior, and substance abuse. The family structures involved in these cases were also quite complicated, involving multiple fathers and extended households.

One of the roles of the CASA is to be an effective advocate for the child. CASAs' adherence to this role was addressed by the contact data for the investigation activities. CASAs showed more instances of contacts with the victims, while social workers were more likely to contact abusers and other family members. The additional finding that CASAs had contact with fewer groups than social workers in the monitoring phase is somewhat contradictory to our survey findings, which suggested that CASAs provide more intensive case monitoring than social workers. One possible explanation for this discrepancy is that CASA documentation of these activities is inadequate, making the comparison invalid. If this is the case, claims of increased monitoring efficiency by CASAs cannot be supported or refuted with CASA program data as it is currently being collected.

The role of the CASA as a child advocate was similarly addressed by data indicating the types of recommendations made by CASA and social workers. The data showed that CASAs made significantly more recommendations relating to the victims than did social workers. This finding suggests that CASAs were indeed focusing their attention on the children in these cases, and fulfilling their roles as child advocates. Social workers, on the other hand, showed a tendency, in at least one site, to focus more attention on abuser issues than did the CASAs. In interpreting this finding, it is important to note that written documentation of social worker recommendations may be incomplete.

One measure of CASA's effectiveness is the degree to which volunteers' recommendations are followed by the court. These analyses showed that the vast majority of CASA recommendations were either fully or partially incorporated into the court orders. This finding may illustrate the utility of CASAs' recommendations in courtroom decision-making. Although the direct influence of CASA recommendations on judges is unknown, the finding that these recommendations are highly consistent with court orders implies that CASA input is being considered by the judges in many cases.

Finally, almost one-quarter of closed cases were returned to the system, either through the court or social services. Given the fact that the follow-up time examined was relatively short, this return rate may be considered substantial. However, this finding is very difficult to interpret without comparison to an appropriate non-CASA group. In addition, long-term outcomes such as this should be followed for a substantially longer period of time to determine impact.

## **VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Impact of NIJ State and Local Participatory Evaluation Program**

While conducting this evaluation under NIJ's State and Local Participatory Evaluation Program, the evaluators interacted with the state Advisory Committee, state and local program administrators, NIJ technical assistants, local court officials, local social services representatives, and local CASA program staff. These individuals participated in the evaluation in many different capacities; their contributions included, in part, reviewing evaluation instruments, assisting in data access activities, clarifying program policy for the evaluation team, and providing feedback on preliminary drafts of this report. The evaluators were also invited to provide evaluation updates to the state Advisory Committee at its quarterly meetings. The evaluation team used this opportunity not only to discuss the research progress, but also to elicit feedback from Advisory Committee member on difficulties or concerns with the evaluation effort. DCJS' Criminal Justice Research Center Evaluation Section benefited from the NIJ State and Local Participatory Evaluation Program in several ways. The project gave the evaluation team an opportunity to interact with involved individuals on several levels and facilitated the building of cooperative relationships with them. These new relationships will likely be useful to the Evaluation Section's future efforts in evaluating juvenile programs. In addition, this project allowed the Evaluation Section to dramatically increase its accumulation of knowledge and experience for evaluating programs in the area of juvenile criminal justice services. This outcome will undoubtedly assist the Evaluation Section in future evaluations of like programs.

### **Evaluation of the Virginia CASA Program**

The lack of detailed data on CASA programs and their impacts precludes us from forming a definitive assessment of this program's long-term effects on its clients. However, extensive survey data suggested that courtroom participants value the program and are largely satisfied

with the services it provides. For instance, judges, social workers, and GALs frequently cited the provision of increased information to the court, attorneys, and caseworkers as a primary benefit of the program. This benefit was partially attributed to the fact that small CASA caseloads may allow volunteers to provide more intensive case monitoring than social workers, who are constrained by heavy caseloads and limited resources. Furthermore, courtroom professionals typically characterized their relationships with CASAs as positive. In addition, case review data indicated that CASAs' recommendations were fairly consistent with court orders, implying that their input is being considered in the decision-making process.

Other case review data, which examined family history variables relevant to victims and abusers, emphasized the striking complexity of these cases and the pervasive occurrence of detrimental life circumstances in the population served by CASAs. Furthermore, a review of CASA activities and recommendations to the court indicated that CASAs are indeed focusing their attention on the children in these complex cases, and thereby fulfilling their roles as child advocates. Survey data further indicated that providing additional support to these families (particularly the children) and the workers who deal with them is clearly considered to be a worthwhile contribution by judges and other involved professionals. Supplemental evaluation activities revealed very little evidence to dispute this claim.

Although the program is well-received, the evaluators have identified several areas where program administration and operation may be improved; the following recommendations were developed to address these issues. These recommendations are based upon the quantitative and qualitative data presented in this report. Some of these recommendations are based on data from only three localities; therefore, these recommendations should be examined closely to determine their applicability to other CASA programs.

## **Role Clarification**

- **Program directors, judges, social workers, and GALs should work together to devise a method to clarify participant roles in each locality.**

Survey data indicated that volunteers, social workers, and GALs are frequently unsure of the CASA's role. Social workers in particular expressed their lack of understanding of the CASA's role, and the fact that this information has not been communicated to them.

The issue of role "boundaries" seemed to generate mixed reactions from volunteers and social workers. Volunteers often indicated cooperative and respectful relationships with social workers. Others volunteers, however, reported less positive relationships, citing some social workers' defensive reactions to volunteers who might "threaten their territory." Social workers showed similar ambivalence, suggesting that CASAs sometimes overstep the boundaries of their role by acting as if they are the social worker's "boss." Other social workers, however, expressed appreciation of CASA's actions as the system monitor. Both CASAs and social workers seem to suffer from ineffective communication between the two. Each group sometimes perceives itself as the adversary and expressed concern that this difficulty has affected information sharing

between them. This problem could be addressed, in part, by social workers allowing CASAs equal access to relevant case materials. By the same token, CASAs should respect the professional training of social workers and acknowledge differing opinions in a non-threatening manner.

Several CASAs viewed their role as becoming a friend to the child. Other CASAs emphatically stated that this is not the CASA role. This point certainly needs to be clarified at the local and state level, as “over-involvement” is the most prevalent complaint regarding CASAs offered by other professionals.

CASA directors and volunteers were dissatisfied with the sometimes unrealistic or inappropriate expectations that judges, social workers, and GALs may have of the program. To address this issue, all parties should participate in a formal agreement to solidify the expectations of each, and consider issues such as visitation supervision and transportation that often become points of contention.

In addition, judges, social workers, CASA directors, and CASA volunteers consistently questioned the role of the GAL in these cases. Most CASA volunteers asserted that they do not like the way the GAL system is functioning, and contended that the GAL serves only as the “mouthpiece” to relay information that the CASA has collected. Many expressed the opinion that most GALs, while helpful when legal questions arise, spend little time on a case, do little in the way of investigation, and often do not meet the victim until the court appearance. Although volunteers and judges cited the new GAL training regulations as having the potential to improve this situation, much dissatisfaction was apparent. Future programming decisions should examine the duplicative nature of these roles and pursue meaningful delineation of them.

## **Geographical Expansion**

- **DCJS and the Advisory Committee to the Court-Appointed Special Advocate and Children’s Justice Act Programs should explore the feasibility of program expansion to rural areas.**

The development of individual CASA programs across the state originates at the local level. Current programs are geographically concentrated in urban and suburban areas of Central and Eastern Virginia. Apart from a few new programs, rural areas have been slow to initiate the development of these programs. Further study should examine the feasibility of expansion in these areas, based in part on input from the currently operating rural programs.

## **Program Start-Up**

- **Directors of new programs should make strong efforts to secure social services “buy-in” at program inception.**

Many programs are currently employing this approach. Based on the evaluation data, programs that include social services in program development have markedly better relationships with social services. Consequently, social workers were more likely to express high satisfaction with the CASA program in these localities. In addition, social workers also indicated a desire for more collaboration with CASA programs. Based on these findings, conflict resolution between the CASA program and social services (when needed) might be facilitated by including the latter in early stages of program start-up. Securing the social services buy-in could take the form of including social services officials on local advisory boards and in CASA volunteer training; these policies have already been adopted by several local programs.

### **Program Standardization (Data)**

- **DCJS should provide additional training for program directors and the clerical staff on database development and management, and should explore software packages specifically designed for CASA programs.**

The database software package (Paradox) that DCJS provided to local programs is not well understood by many staff and directors. Some directors simply do not use their database because they do not understand how to operate it. In addition, many directors expressed frustration in using the database to access the information necessary to complete DCJS quarterly reports and other required documentation. The Chesapeake CASA program uses CASA Manager, a software package developed specifically for use in CASA programs. DCJS should explore the utility of this program and other software programs (if available) that are application specific. Regardless of which software package is used, DCJS should ensure that CASA program staff are adequately trained in its use.

- **Virginia CASA program directors should collaborate to develop a set of standardized forms for inclusion in all CASA case files.**

In evaluating this program, researchers discovered that obtaining basic information about CASA cases was a difficult and time-consuming process. In addition, our attempts to address purported CASA impacts were significantly hindered by the lack of available data. Standardized forms should be created for the following reasons:

1. *Programs need a standardized base of case data that is consistently collected.* At this point, programs have very little retrievable information on each case. Information available in the database is initially entered and rarely updated. One or two short forms could easily provide a written record of basic information, such as client and abuser demographics, household and family structure, and relevant life circumstances variables (e.g., parental drug addiction, mental illness, etc.). Important program data would include the type of case, the name of each CASA and social worker who has staffed the case, and the length of time each worked on the case.

2. *Programs need data to support claims of CASA impacts.* Directors suggested many areas of CASA impact (e.g., decreased time in out-of-home placement, and decreased court processing time) that could not be supported with available data. Programs must document this type of information to demonstrate the validity of these claims. Important outcome-relevant information could easily be collected on a single form. As an example of out-of-home placement documentation, each CASA volunteer might be asked to complete a short table to document each placement type and the time spent in each placement. This type of documentation, which is currently used in some social services departments, provides a simple method for maintaining important impact information. Additionally, program directors should pursue court cooperation in obtaining follow-up information on long-term outcomes in CASA cases. For example, volunteers could follow clients through the Court Services Unit to determine instances of subsequent court activity.

3. *Volunteers should keep a running record of case activities to describe case involvement, enhance accountability, and facilitate future evaluations of the program.* CASA contact logs are currently recommended, but not required, by most CASA programs. Without this information, the CASA program is unable to document the services that volunteers provide to the child, family, and other relevant parties. In short, this leaves them unable to account for how they spend their time, and leaves untestable the claim that CASAs provide more intensive contact and monitoring than social workers. In addition, CASAs may withdraw from a case, leaving little information for the volunteers who replace them. Many CASAs resist contact log completion because it is perceived as too time consuming. However, according to directors, many CASAs do keep a personal log of case activities in an unstandardized form. This being the case, the completion of contact logs would enhance CASA program/case documentation dramatically without significantly increasing paperwork burdens on the volunteers. Contact log documentation would also increase the future evaluability of this program. These logs should ideally collect descriptive yet succinct information, including the date of the contact, the person contacted or the activity performed, the amount of time spent on the activity, and a brief description of the activity.

## Training

- **A formalized training program for CASA Directors should be established.**

No formalized training program exists for CASA directors in Virginia. The majority of directors expressed the desire for such a program to be established. This training should cover topics relevant to CASA program administration (i.e., fundraising), volunteer supervision, and interagency collaboration. Directors are particularly interested in obtaining a more comprehensive understanding of state law, legal issues, and court procedures. This training should be developed and regulated by DCJS and the Advisory Committee. The National CASA Association may also be of some assistance in developing the curriculum for this training.

- **Standardize training requirements for CASA volunteers.**

Although state regulations do require a minimum of 25 hours of classroom training for new CASA volunteers, training requirements for in-service training, courtroom observation, and community service field observation are not adequately defined. Directors exercise considerable latitude in interpreting these requirements. As a result, training requirements show substantial variability across programs. Given that courtroom professionals are concerned with variability in volunteer expertise, DCJS and the Advisory Committee should revise statewide training requirements for volunteers, in particular, to provide minimum requirements for in-service training and courtroom observation. Documentation of training experiences should be required as a permanent section of the CASA volunteer's personnel file.

- **Volunteer training should be modified in the following six areas:**

1. *Increase volunteer understanding of state laws, legal issues surrounding abuse/neglect, and juvenile court procedures.* Judges, social workers, and GALs expressed frustration with CASAs' lack of knowledge and/or awareness of legal constraints involved in child abuse/neglect cases. These professionals maintain that CASAs sometimes have unrealistic expectations of the court and social services. Volunteers likewise express dissatisfaction with their level of knowledge in this area. Currently, programs may determine the amount of legal training provided to volunteers at the local level. It is recommended that program directors increase legal training and address this aspect of training as a priority. Moreover, DCJS and the Advisory Committee should consider establishing a statewide minimum requirement for volunteer training on this specific topic. In addition, courtroom observation is currently not required by state regulations as an element of CASA training; however, judges, CASA volunteers, and CASA directors frequently stated that this is a beneficial way to learn about the role of the court and courtroom participants in child abuse/neglect cases. For these reasons, courtroom observation should be a required component of CASA training in all localities. Further study should determine: (1) the specific classroom content for legal training, (2) the most appropriate amount of such training, and (3) the minimum requirements for courtroom observation.

2. *Increase volunteer awareness of community resources.* Many social workers were similarly dissatisfied with the CASAs' level of knowledge regarding available community resources. These respondents suggested that CASAs need a thorough knowledge of available options to make informed recommendations to the court. It is also noteworthy that the volunteers themselves often report feeling undertrained in this topic. As with legal training, the amount of required training in community resources is determined by the individual programs. All programs incorporate some degree of classroom training on community resources (as little as one hour); however, only a few programs require field observation of local community service providers. Therefore, the recommendations in this area are twofold. First, program directors should enhance community resource knowledge by increasing classroom training and encouraging or requiring field observations. Second, program directors should ensure that an up-to-date community resource guide is always available at the CASA office.

3. *Expand emphasis on cultural diversity training.* Courtroom professionals expressed some concern with the differences between CASA volunteers and the clients they serve. CASA volunteers are, for the most part, white, middle-class females, while their clients have very disparate backgrounds. Judges and social workers, in particular, suggested that some CASAs may have difficulty understanding the life circumstances of their client population. Although the amount of cultural diversity training is determined at the local level, some CASA directors acknowledged that this element of the CASAs' training is underemphasized. Thus, program directors should continue to include, and expand emphasis on, cultural diversity training for new volunteers. Additions to the cultural diversity curriculum should likewise be provided to currently active volunteers through in-service training sessions.

4. *Increase volunteer understanding of the CASA, social worker, and GAL roles.* As described in the Role Clarification section of these recommendations, courtroom participants seem unsure of the CASA's role. Judges and social workers additionally suggested that CASAs should become more aware of social worker training, abilities, and restraints. To ensure understanding of these roles, CASA programs should expand emphasis on role clarification in volunteer training, and increase efforts to educate social workers about CASA roles, training, background, and experience. Although many CASA programs currently enlist judges, social workers, and GALs to participate in role clarification training, it is recommended that all CASA programs adopt this training strategy.

5. *Incorporate or emphasize training on the related topics of case closure and CASA/client separation.* A review of CASA training protocols and case files revealed little consideration of steps toward case closure and CASA/client separation. Judges and social workers noted that children may feel "dropped" by the CASA if the case is closed abruptly. Currently, case closure and CASA/client separation are not included as required elements of CASA volunteer training. It is therefore recommended that these topics be incorporated into the required volunteer training curriculum. Program directors should address these topics in training for new volunteers and offer similar in-service training for currently active volunteers.

6. *Incorporate or emphasize training on the case monitoring function.* Monitoring is specifically stated in the Code of Virginia as one duty of the CASA volunteer; however, no state regulations address this function nor do CASA programs typically have policies guiding these activities. Given that monitoring is reported to be a large part of the CASA role by volunteers and program directors, volunteer classroom training should be required on this topic to clarify the goals of monitoring. This training should also address strategies for effective monitoring and troubleshooting related to completing monitoring tasks.

## Scope of the Program

- Judges and program directors should consider continuing CASA's use in complex custody cases, and addressing CHINS assignments in a more selective manner.



CASA programs generally prioritize their assignments such that abuse/neglect cases are the primary areas of concern. However, some programs are capable of handling other types of cases, such as custody or CHINS cases. Custody cases often involve children who are caught in the middle of family conflict, and are thereby experiencing significant psychological distress. Unlike many children in abuse/neglect cases who are removed from the volatile environments, children in custody cases are often the focal point of ongoing conflict. For the most part, social services departments are not involved in these cases unless an abuse/neglect investigation is required. Although many of these cases are assigned to the CASA program based on the custody petitions, file review data showed that abuse/neglect often emerges as a factor much later in the case. Therefore, these children are not receiving services from any other source, at least initially. In addition, many judges would like to see the CASA program used more in custody cases. For these reasons, custody cases seem to be an appropriate area for CASA assignment. It is recommended that judges and program directors continue to service these cases, when locally appropriate.

On the other hand, CHINS cases often involve older children who are already known to the court as juvenile offenders. Our review of CASA files in CHINS cases suggested that there is little for a CASA to do on such cases. CASAs experienced difficulties in locating many of these children because they have runaway or truancy problems. Judges express some interest in using CASAs more in CHINS cases (even though judges reported assigning CASAs in no more than 10% of their entire CHINS caseload), but this idea should be carefully examined before expanding use in this area. Although the children in these cases certainly need services, it appears as though CASA intervention would be most beneficial on cases which are consistent with their specific training, as opposed to CHINS cases which frequently involve substantially different issues.

## CASA Reports

- Program directors should consider the utility of a standardized format for court reports.

Judges and GALs report that the information contained in the CASA report is very helpful. Because CASA volunteers' reports vary tremendously in style and content, a standardized report format may facilitate the dissemination of this important information. For this type of change to be effective, program directors should meet with judges to assess user needs. One possible format would involve a series of "check-off" boxes to record basic information about the victim, the abuser, and the family situation, compiled with a narrative section for more descriptive information. A report format such as this could simultaneously address several data needs. Standardized reporting might also lessen the time and effort necessary to write the report. In addition, less articulate volunteers may not be as intimidated by the reporting requirements, which may have positive impacts on volunteer recruitment and turnover.