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## STRENGTHENING THE VOICES OF CASA STATEWIDE

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### **HHSC Exceptional Item Request by Texas CASA**

Background: Texas CASA serves as the financial conduit for state funding for the 72 local Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) programs in Texas. During the 84th Session, funding and oversight were moved to HHSC from the Office of Attorney General pursuant to SB 354. Appropriations Act funding for CASA programs (along with Children's Advocacy Centers) is included under HHSC item D.2.4 Strategy: Child Advocacy Programs, as well as in HHSC Rider 70. For the current biennium CASA is appropriated \$13,013,000 in FY 2016 and \$12,936,000 in FY 2017. Most state funds are allocated to local programs based on the number of children served, or distributed under a competitive growth fund.

Current Situation: The Texas child protection system is in crisis. CPS caseworker turnover has reached dangerous levels in Dallas, and other areas of the state are struggling to investigate allegations in a timely fashion. There have been several high profile child fatalities. There is also a critical shortage of appropriate, paid placement options for children in state custody. DFPS has been unable to find any placement options for some children. At the same time removals have increased overall in recent months according to sources at DFPS.

As a collaborative partner with CPS and the judicial system, the stress on the child protection system and the growth in removals directly impact CASA programs and their ability to best serve children in state care. Texas CASA has been working with local programs to grow our volunteer base and provide support to more children. In FY 2015 8,476 CASA volunteers served 25,947 children, 54 percent of children in care. Texas CASA is leading efforts to increase the growth rate in the number of CASA volunteers statewide and the number of children served. Texas CASA has established a new program to improve recruitment and retention of volunteers, including developing a resource and best practices guide specifically for this purpose. Texas CASA has also begun a statewide marketing campaign in four media markets in Texas to raise awareness of CASA and increase volunteer recruitment. Texas CASA has also set aside a portion of state funding for a competitive growth fund.

Exceptional Item Request: Texas CASA is requesting consideration for HHSC to include an Exceptional Item in its LAR for the 2018-19 Biennium of an additional \$2 million per year, or \$4 million for the biennium, to help support growth and other needs in the CASA network. We anticipate having better data related to this request after the end of FY 2016. These additional funds will help support the growth in programs and counties served, growth in volunteers and children served, possible reductions in caseloads for CASA volunteer supervisors, continued efforts to build the CASA brand to promote understanding and volunteer growth, and other efforts to improve court representation and advocacy for children in state care.