



2021

eVOLution report

Evolving to Meet a Changing System

Texas CASA is dedicated to a future when every child in Texas is safe. We support volunteer advocacy in the child welfare system through strategic, collaborative efforts with the local CASA programs that provide vital services to children in foster care and their families.

Texas CASA has become a national resource, providing best practices to programs large and small across the country, grounded in our commitment to continual innovation.

IN FY 2021

72 LOCAL CASA PROGRAMS

219 COUNTIES SUPERVISED

10,920 VOLUNTEER ADVOCATES

SERVING 28,543 CHILDREN IN STATE CARE

FOCUS ON FAMILY ENGAGEMENT & FAMILY REUNIFICATION

In 2020, Texas CASA changed our mission statement, adding the words “and families” to recognize the crucial importance of families, family engagement and reunification efforts.

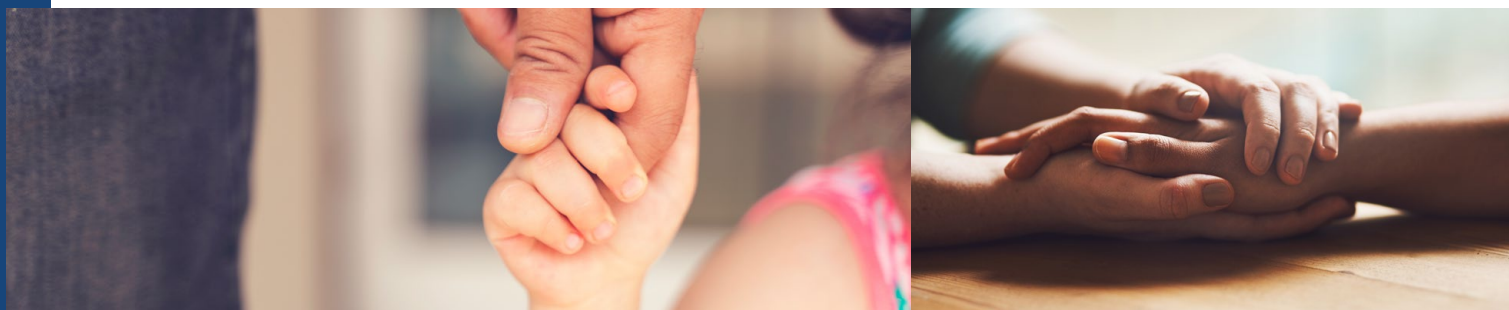


Texas CASA Mission: “To support local CASA volunteer advocacy programs and to advocate for effective public policy for children and families in the child protection system.”



Texas CASA has made significant, ongoing efforts to embed a family focus in the daily work of CASA staff and volunteers across the state.

In FY21, 81% of cases with a CASA volunteer ended with the child remaining with family.



Collaborative Family Engagement (CFE)

Collaborative Family Engagement (CFE) is an initiative that has truly transformed the landscape of child welfare in Texas. The main goals of CFE are to help children achieve strong connections with supportive people and permanency—a permanent home—faster, preferably with relatives or other trusted loved ones. In partnership with the Department of Family & Protective Services, local CASA programs and community partners, we are working to ensure that every child in foster care has the opportunity for strong lifelong connections.

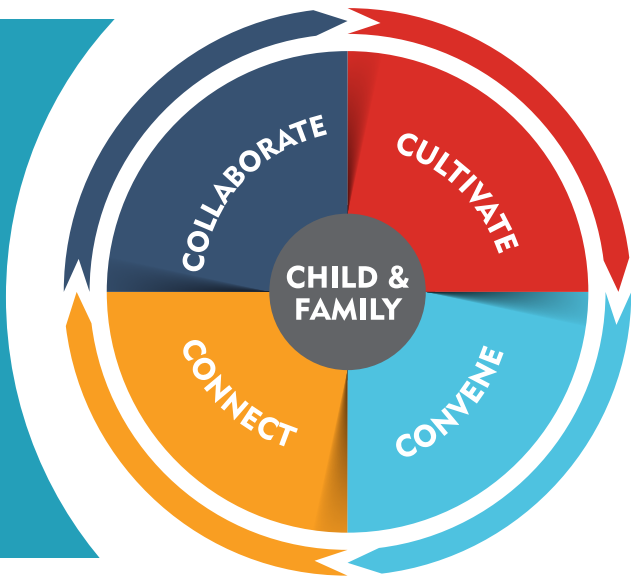
4 Cs of CFE

Collaborate: Greater collaboration between stakeholders to involve families and build networks.

Cultivate: Access to connection, engagement and searching tools to engage and find family/important relationships.

Convene: Families and their support network come together for family meetings.

Connect: A lifetime network of supportive relationships is formed for the child and their family.

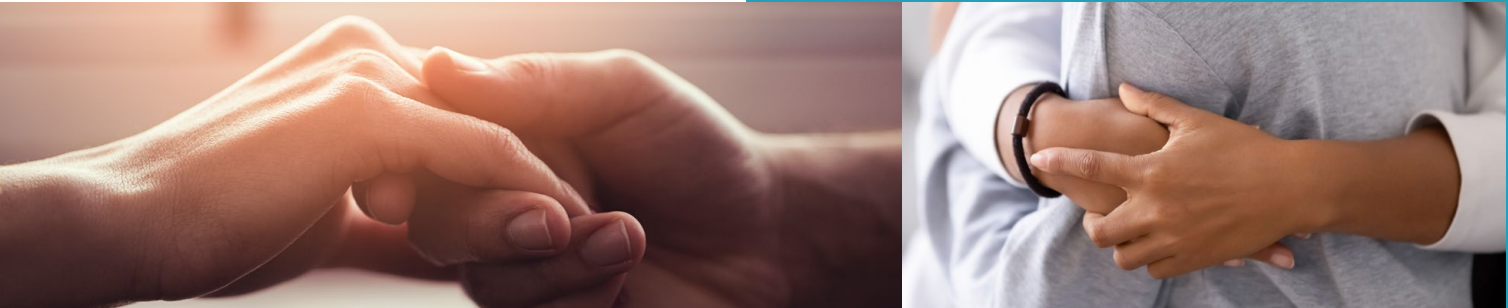


In FY 2021, CFE expanded into:

- 108 of the 254 Texas counties,
- 51 local CASA programs (71% of the CASA network),
- 10 of the 11 CPS regions, and
- 4 Community-Based Care providers.

In FY 2022, CFE will be in 60 of the 72 CASA programs and all 11 CPS regions. CFE is on track to be statewide in 2023.

Family Preservation in Action



CASA Child Advocates of Montgomery County

Parents Shannon and Jason struggled with substance use, were estranged from their extended family and had no real supportive connections. Their two children, Kayla and Hudson, were placed in a foster home. During the first hearing after removal, Shannon and Jason were asked whom they could call on for support. They answered, “no one.”

CASA volunteers Anna and Charlotte guided the children to help find family connections using CFE tools, which led to identifying and engaging their paternal grandparents. The children moved in with their grandparents while Shannon and Jason participated in services and worked to get sober.

Shannon and Jason’s support network grew throughout the CFE process. They were able to stay sober, Jason found a job, and the parents were able to move into a house near their children. The case closed after nine months in a highly emotional scene at the courtroom, with the family happily reunited. “It felt like the world was behind me to get my kids home,” Shannon said.

**Parents’ and children’s names have been changed.*

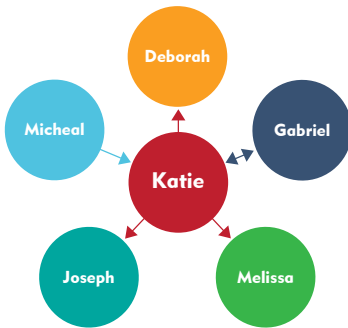


“My hope is that they continue through the court system to assign CASA advocates to most of our cases, because then we can continue to incorporate these types of tools like CFE so we can better work together and, at the end of the day, continue to provide a better service for our youth.” –Veronica Martinez, Family Group Decision Making facilitator for DFPS in Dallas County

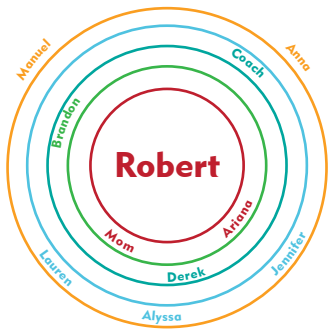
“I’m looking for CASA volunteers to bring courageous and common-sense recommendations.” –Local Judge



Texas CASA Provided 14 Tools for Collaborative Family Engagement Statewide



EcoMap
An ecomap is a diagram that highlights different areas and connections in a person’s life.



Circles of Trust
A diagram of concentric circles with a person’s name in the center and people they are connected to in the same or outer circles.



CASA MESSAGING BOOK: SPEAKING IN ONE VOICE

Transforming Our Messaging

Texas CASA developed the CASA Messaging Book in 2020 to help establish a common language for the network, and to update branding, messaging and wording to reflect new values and understanding moving forward. Changes reflect the shift in our communications to be more inclusive, equitable and family-focused. As the child welfare system evolves, language around supporting families becomes more and more important—as does a nuanced understanding of the collaborative role of a CASA volunteer.

OUTDATED	NEW/CURRENT
CASA volunteers give a voice to a child.	CASA volunteers help ensure a child's voice is heard. OR CASA volunteers amplify a child's voice in court.
RATIONALE: Children have their own voices. The new language points to the true intention of the sentiment: The CASA volunteer can lift up their voices to make sure they are heard and honored.	
CASA volunteers get to know the child.	CASA volunteers get to know the child, parents and their family.
RATIONALE: Families are their own experts and know what they need. By getting to know the parents and family, we can better serve the children and help make sure everyone has what they need to heal and thrive.	

Collecting Crucial New Data

In data collection upgrades during 2021, we worked to bring all CASA programs in Texas into a common vocabulary around advocacy—and to use consistent data terms to track advocacy activities. Every time they take action to advocate for a child or youth—like face-to-face contact with a child or attending court hearings—volunteers and staff record their advocacy efforts in an online data system. With the new, unified data terms, we know, for example, that from 9/1/2021 to 11/30/2021, the following top five activities took place—including 27,741 hours of face-to-face contact between CASA volunteers and children in foster care.

ACTIVITY TYPE	# INSTANCES	#HOURS
CONTACT: CHILD FACE-TO-FACE	13,690	27,741
CONTACT: PLACEMENT	27,739	10,314
CONTACT: CPS/SSCC	22,059	8,871
ATTEND HEARING	3,794	5,144
CONTACT: PARENT	9,132	4,642

Pioneering Best Practices Clergy, CASA and Community Initiative



Clergy, CASA and Community is a Texas CASA initiative to build a network of faith communities and leaders that champion speaking up for local children in foster care and their families. Our goal is to bring communities and clergy leaders together to lift their voices for the children who need them, and to develop a rich network that engages new volunteers and supporters for the CASA mission.



Faith communities are a tremendous resource that CASA programs throughout Texas can turn to for support. Programs can engage, activate and partner with diverse faith communities to recruit volunteers, and build support for children, their parents, families, foster families and adoptive families.



“I’ve become a lifetime supporter of CASA and more sensitive to the needs of others who cannot help themselves, because of being an advocate. My faith emphasis has been to be a social activist and a catalyst for change. This experience taught me how big of a difference you make in a child’s life, which will impact them for life.” –Syed Masood, CASA Volunteer

“As I embark on this effort to encourage others to serve the ministry of foster care and adoption, I’m reminded of what drives me. I have this saying, “Zeal is short-lived, but passion is permanent.” I hold on to those words because it always keeps me connected to my passion which always leads to discovering my purpose.” –Pastor Eric Hallback, Rock Faith Center, El Paso



Pioneering Best Practices

Volunteer Coaching & Advocacy

With our Volunteer Coaching & Advocacy program, we share tools with the aim of supporting the CASA network in a more volunteer-centered model of supervision. We focus on advocacy that leads to family reunification, whenever safe and possible.

In 2017, we introduced a coaching model for working with volunteers—transitioning away from a managerial model. Coach-supervisor is a term now used to emphasize our move beyond traditional case supervision to coaching, mentoring, supporting and actively retaining CASA volunteers.



Powerful Coaching Questions:

- Could the child be safely returned home today?
- Observing the home today, would the child be removed from the home?
- Are their beliefs and values or your beliefs and values preventing you from recommending reunification?
- At the most basic and not idyllic level, how are the parents demonstrating an ability to meet the child's unique needs?
- How are the special needs of the child being met?
- What more can you do to keep the child connected to their community and culture?

Minimum Sufficient Level of Care (MSL):

Programs coach volunteers to use the Minimum Sufficient Level of Care (MSL) concept, a basic set of safety criteria. MSL is used in determining reunification, in monitoring parents' progress so the child can be safely returned home, and to guide advocacy.

Why Do We Use It?

- Maintains child's right to safety & permanence while not ignoring parental rights
- Required by law
- Obtainable for parents to reach
- Protects children from individual biases & cultural neglect
- Encourages family reunification
- Keeps decision makers focused on least harmful alternative for the child

Use of the Minimum Sufficient Level of Care (MSL) model helps ensure that CASA's recommendations are made in the best interest of the child, without biases based on class, culture, or other factors not relevant to the child's safety or care. Texas CASA recognizes that separation from family is inherently traumatic for children and that families should be reunified once parents demonstrate that they can provide a safe environment.

Commitment to Continuous Improvement



Focus Groups & Stakeholder Surveys

In 2020, Texas CASA held focus groups and shared surveys with five partner groups for input on improving advocacy for children and families and strengthening our partnerships. They included:

- Youth Who Experienced Foster Care
- Parents Involved in Child Welfare
- Childcare Providers
- Attorney Roundtable
- Judicial Roundtable

In particular, the members of these groups noted that the stability and continuity of CASA involvement over the course of cases benefits children and families. There was also broad recognition that CASA volunteers form good relationships with the children they serve, and can arrange access to community resources for children and families. The feedback generated useful suggestions for improvement around training, quality assurance, public policy and volunteer recruitment, all of which Texas CASA and local programs implemented.

Leading through Crisis: Children in Unlicensed Facilities

The Texas child welfare system is grappling with a placement capacity crisis that has left far too many children in unlicensed placements such as offices and hotels. As the system struggles to create new placements and keep children safe, Texas CASA is committed to finding solutions. In 2021, Texas CASA hosted six Children Without Placement Conversation Circles for CASA staff, CPS and Community-Based Care providers to brainstorm, problem-solve, consult on cases and connect with others from across the state.

CEO Vicki Spriggs published several op-eds offering useful suggestions and informing the public of the increased need for CASA volunteers, foster families and therapeutic foster families to serve vulnerable children.



"It's so difficult for us to acknowledge the truths behind our current issues and what needs to happen moving forward, which is a better, family-friendly foster care system. So how do we have those hard conversations?" – CPS/SSCC Participant

"It was strangely reassuring to connect with others and know others are feeling the same way."
– CASA Volunteer



Innovative Education & Thought Leadership

The Texas CASA Learning Center, CASA College and Program Portal offer 200+ online learning resources, courses, guidebooks and toolkits for staff and volunteers to continually advance their knowledge and hone their skills.

Texas CASA is focused on providing education to staff, volunteers and the general public on the child welfare system, achieving the highest quality advocacy, providing trauma-informed care and better understanding of the lived experience of children and families in the system.

Since 2017

Opinion-Editorials

16 opinion-editorials by Texas CASA CEO Vicki Spriggs have been published in Texas newspapers, illuminating the strengths of the CASA network and offering solutions for solving the persistent challenges of the child welfare system, together.

Since 2019

CASA on the Go: Continuing Education for CASA Volunteers Podcast

17 episodes of our continuing education podcast have helped connect CASA volunteers with engaging and relevant training designed to help strengthen advocacy for children and families. Each short, dynamic episode features informative discussions with subject matter experts exploring topics connected to child welfare and practical tips for informed CASA advocacy.

Since 2018

Conversations with CASA

36 episodes of our video series, Conversations with CASA, have debuted on YouTube, featuring CEO Vicki Spriggs in conversation with child welfare leaders and advocates, from DFPS to Disability Texas.

Since 2020

Distinguished Speaker Series

In 2020, Texas CASA launched the Distinguished Speaker Series, an advocacy-focused learning opportunity for the CASA network and other community partners involved in the child welfare system. The multi-part series features high-caliber speakers sharing their expertise on topics and issues impacting the child welfare system and tips on how to enhance our advocacy for children and families.

2020 Speakers



Dr. Jessica A. Pryce



Riki Wilchins



Kevin Campbell



Ibram X. Kendi

2021 Speakers



Diane Smith Howard



Dr. Mical Raz



Dr. Jerry Milner



Dr. Robert Anda