

LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY GUIDE

89TH LEGISLATIVE SESSION OVERVIEW

RESOURCES FOR LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY TEAMS



STRENGTHENING THE VOICES OF CASA STATEWIDE



TABLE OF CONTENTS

SECTION 1 – UNDERSTANDING CASA LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY

SECTION 2 – OVERVIEW OF THE 89TH LEGISLATIVE SESSION

SECTION 3 – TEXAS CASA LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

SECTION 4 – OTHER IMPORTANT CHILD WELFARE INFORMATION

SECTION 5 – LAT TO-DO'S *BEFORE* SESSION

SECTION 6 – LAT TO-DO'S *DURING* SESSION

SECTION 7 – LAT TO-DO'S *AFTER* SESSION

SECTION 8 – LAT TO-DON'TS

SECTION 9 – ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



SECTION 1: UNDERSTANDING CASA LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY



STRENGTHENING THE VOICES OF CASA STATEWIDE



WHY IS LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY IMPORTANT?

MAKING YOUR VOICE HEARD

Legislators want to hear from their constituents. With the engagement of CASA volunteers across Texas, our priority bills are much more likely to be successful. Your advocacy efforts are key in helping to shape the laws that affect our state's most vulnerable population. By speaking with one voice, we can have a powerful impact on the child protection system by representing the best interests of children from the courtroom to the Capitol!

WHY ARE CASA VOLUNTEERS SUCH EFFECTIVE LEGISLATIVE ADVOCATES FOR CHILDREN?

For the same reasons that they are effective advocates in court! CASA volunteers are:

- Well trained to speak up for children confidently, professionally and persuasively.
- Motivated to serve the best interest of Texas' most vulnerable children.
- Experienced in advocating and speaking up for children.
- Engaged community members, constituents and voters, which brings a unique perspective and power to their advocacy.
- Knowledgeable about how the child welfare system works (and what can be improved) and can share personal case examples of each, which helps to put a face on the issues.
- Passionate about helping children and families.



WHAT IS A LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY TEAM?

A Legislative Advocacy Team (LAT) is a group of committed CASA volunteers, staff and board members who take their advocacy for children to the next level by using the experience and knowledge they have gained to advocate for change in the child protection system. Each LAT has at least one chair: a CASA volunteer who agrees to be the face of the LAT and the point of contact for the group. In addition to the chair, there is at least one CASA staff member who is responsible for supporting the team.

WHY DOES CASA ADVOCATE AT THE STATE LEVEL?

There are many opportunities for the public to provide input or suggestions for improvements to the child welfare system. The voice of a CASA volunteer is unique because volunteers have valuable experience working with children and stakeholders in the system without financial incentives that may influence their judgment. CASA volunteers provide a voice for children in care who cannot advocate for themselves.

WHAT CAN LAT MEMBERS EXPECT TO DO?

There are many things that members of LATs can do, depending on their availability and comfort level. Some members feel comfortable writing letters or emails to support changes to the system. Others might want to directly interact with legislators and their staff by meeting with them and inviting them to CASA-related events. LAT members may also advocate at the Texas Capitol by sharing an experience they have had with their legislator in order to emphasize the importance of a bill. We encourage LATs to brainstorm activities with Texas CASA's assistance and support.

WHY SHOULD I PARTICIPATE?

LATs provide volunteers with the opportunity to advocate for children on a larger scale. Knowing that you and other CASAs across the state are working toward improving the child welfare system can bring another degree of satisfaction to your role as an advocate. You can be the voice to create change not only for the children you serve but for every child in the child welfare system.

WHAT ISSUES DO LATS WORK ON?

Issues vary depending on the legislative session and current events. They can include efforts to improve the effectiveness of CASA volunteers, policy improvements for the child welfare system, or asking for additional funding to sustain and grow CASA programs. LAT advocacy at the Capitol significantly contributes to the success of Texas CASA's champion bills and policy priorities during each legislative session.

HOW DO I GET STARTED?

Get in touch with your local CASA program and let them know you would like to become involved in legislative advocacy efforts. Your program can instruct you on the next steps, whether they currently have a LAT or not.



TIPS FOR CASA LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY

STAY UP TO DATE!

Stay informed on our work with the Texas Legislature, including calls to action, by visiting the CASA LAT Facebook page at www.facebook.com/groups/TXCASALATS. Ask to join if you are not already a member!

DEVELOP STRONG RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR LOCAL LEGISLATIVE STAFF

Legislative staffers are essential to the legislative process—they research bills, talk with constituents and policy experts, and keep the legislator informed on all legislative issues. Explaining your concerns and suggestions to them will help get your issue before the legislator.

BE CONSTRUCTIVE WITH YOUR FEEDBACK ON THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

It is important to talk about the challenges you see within the system without badmouthing or blaming Child Protective Services, Community-Based Care providers, attorneys, judges or foster parents. Negativity can diminish your impact and damage CASA's image as a whole.

TELL A PERSONAL CASA STORY

Legislators and their staff meet with people every day about statistics, economics and policies. Your stories and experiences (without using names or other identifying information) will grab their attention.

MAKE A CASE FOR CASA USING YOUR EXPERIENCES AS A VOLUNTEER

You don't need to be an expert on child welfare statistics or the budget to advocate for CASA. Your personal experiences as a volunteer, passion to help children and families, and the fact that you are their constituent are your most persuasive and valuable attributes. If they have questions that you can't answer, you can refer them to the Texas CASA Public Policy team for follow up.

THANK LEGISLATORS AND THEIR STAFF FREQUENTLY

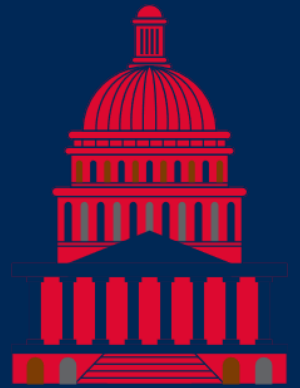
You can never thank them enough for their time and support of CASA.

REMIND THEM WHAT CASA IS AND WHAT WE DO

Don't assume they know the basics of CASA and CASA advocacy. Chances are they don't, and those who do can always learn something new.

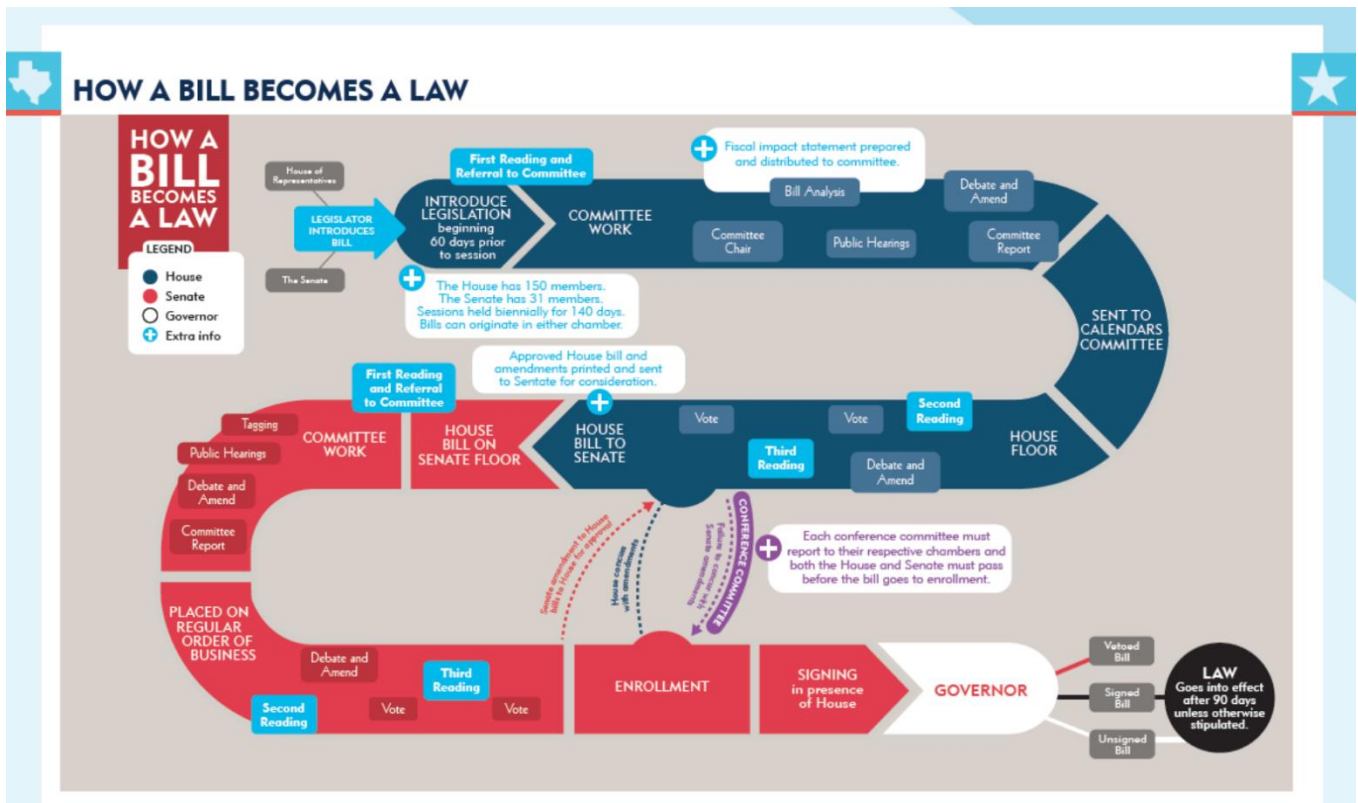


SECTION 2: OVERVIEW OF THE 89TH LEGISLATIVE SESSION



TEXAS LEGISLATURE 101

- Texas has a biennial legislature that meets in Regular Session starting on the second Tuesday of January in odd-numbered years. The 89th Legislative Session will convene on January 14, 2025.
- Regular Sessions last for 140 days. The Governor can also call Special Sessions of the legislature, each of which can last up to 30 days.
- The Texas Legislature includes two law-making entities: the Texas House of Representatives and the Texas Senate.
- The House has 150 members elected to two-year terms. The presiding officer in the House is the Speaker, who is elected by a vote of the House members.
- The Senate has 31 members who normally serve four-year terms. The Lieutenant Governor presides over the Senate and is elected statewide.



SECTION 3: TEXAS CASA LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES



TEXAS CASA LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES FOR THE 89TH LEGISLATIVE SESSION

FUNDING PRIORITIES

- Maintain the current appropriation of \$31.9M in the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) bill pattern.
- Maintain the current state appropriation for Victim of Crime Act (VOCA) funds.
- Maintain the current appropriation of \$643,600 for Family Finding/Collaborative Family Engagement in the Department of Family and Protective Services bill pattern.

POLICY PRIORITIES

- Texas CASA supports policies that preserve families, promote family reunification when possible, and minimize the time children spend in foster care.
- Texas CASA supports funding and policies that provide a child access to safe, stable placements in their community that meet their individual need and support their permanency goals.
- Texas CASA supports funding and policies that further support and encourage placement with relative caregivers.
- Texas CASA supports funding and policies that improve services and supports for older youth in foster care, and older youth exiting foster care.



TEXAS CASA LEGISLATIVE FUNDING PRIORITIES FOR THE 89TH SESSION

SUMMARY

Texas CASA and local CASA programs are fortunate to currently receive funding from the State of Texas through two different state agencies. During the 88th Legislative Session, the Texas Health and Human Services Commission received funding in the amount of \$31.9M for the CASA network for FY 24-25. The Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) received funding for Family Finding/Collaborative Family Engagement in the amount of \$643,600 for FY 24-25.

In addition, Texas CASA and CASA programs receive funding from the Federal Victims of Crime Act (VOCA). In the past few years, there has been a federal shortfall of VOCA funds, and the Texas Legislature has supplemented that funding. During the 88th Legislative Session, the Legislature authorized \$115M to address that shortfall.

BACKGROUND

The vast majority of the funding provided by the Health and Human Services Commission is passed through to the local CASA programs across Texas, with Texas CASA retaining no more than 12% of the total funding. This funding is essential to the operations and administration of the local programs, including subsidizing supervisors to oversee the CASA volunteers who are appointed by the court to represent the best interest of children in child welfare cases.

First funded by the Texas Legislature in 2015, Collaborative Family Engagement is a team-based approach involving CASA volunteers, CPS caseworkers, Community-Based Care providers and other community stakeholders to bring together family members and other committed adults into a child's permanency planning and care.



POLICY POSITION

Texas CASA supports continued funding for local CASA programs.

Texas CASA Supports:

1. Maintaining the current appropriation of \$31.9M in the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) bill pattern
2. Maintaining the current state appropriation for Victim of Crime Act (VOCA) funds
3. Maintaining the current appropriation of \$643,600 for Family Finding/Collaborative Family Engagement in the Department of Family and Protective Services bill pattern



TEXAS CASA & THE CASA NETWORK

Texas CASA is the statewide association for 74 local CASA programs. We work to connect each part of the CASA community and empower the local programs to perform at their highest level. At the local level, the programs recruit, train and supervise CASA volunteers to advocate for children and families involved in the child protection system. At the state level, Texas CASA provides financial support, training and services to help the local programs operate effectively.

We work passionately to improve the child protection system through legislation and other positive public policy changes. We speak up for children and families involved in foster care by bringing their needs to lawmakers’ attention and providing these decision makers with our experiences and perspective.

OUR MISSION

The mission of Texas CASA is to support local CASA volunteer advocacy programs and to advocate for effective public policy for children and families in the child protection system.

OUR VISION

Texas CASA envisions a safe and positive future for all Texas children.

FY23 CASA BY THE NUMBERS	
Local CASA Programs	74
Counties Served	220
CASA Volunteers	8,281
Children Served	20,169



COLLABORATIVE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

WHAT IS COLLABORATIVE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT?

First funded by the Texas Legislature in 2015, Collaborative Family Engagement (CFE) is a team-based approach involving CASA volunteers, CPS caseworkers, Community-Based Care (CBC) providers and other community stakeholders to bring together family members and other committed adults into a child’s permanency planning and care. CFE teams use tools and techniques focused on connection and an understanding of trauma.

CFE GROWTH								
	FY16	FY17	FY18	FY19	FY20	FY21	FY22*	FY23*
PROGRAMS	3	9	20	31	41	51	60	72
COUNTIES	3	12	28	48	90	108	130	174
CHILDREN SERVED	48	234	470	1414	2260	3355	4410	6805
FAMILIES SERVED	20	124	240	795	1232	1883	2417	3938

FY22 TO FY23

54%
INCREASE IN
CHILDREN SERVED

63%
INCREASE IN
FAMILIES SERVED



COLLABORATIVE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT



4 C'S 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

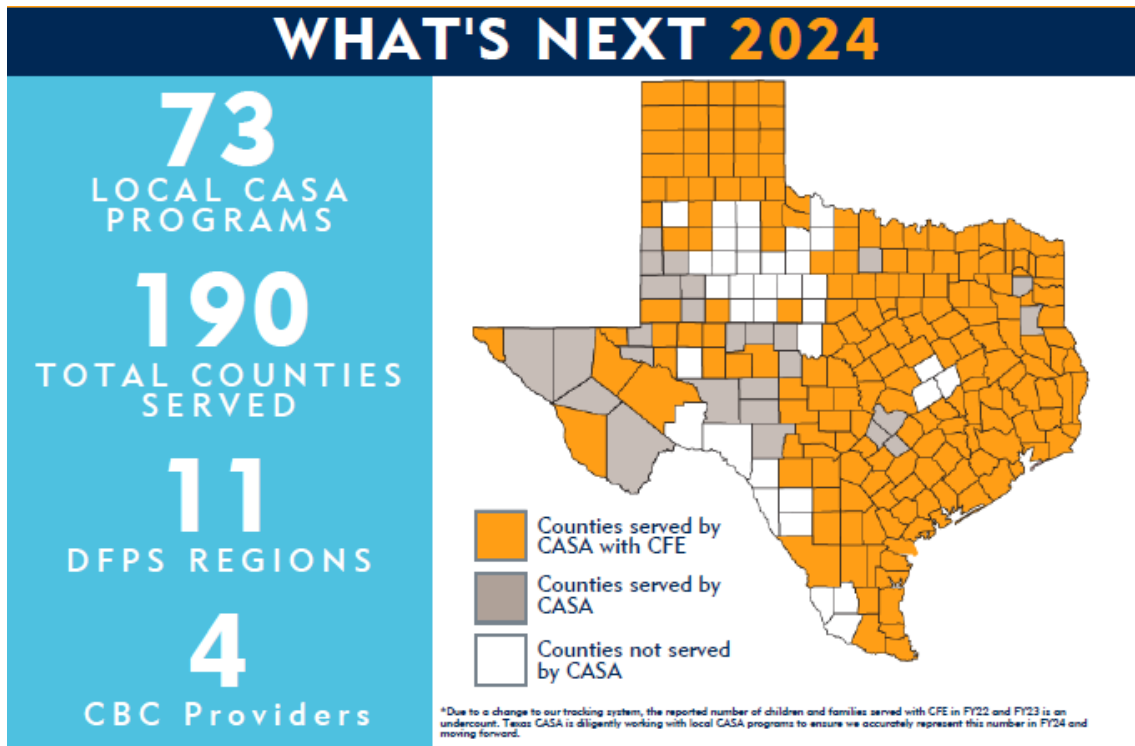


CONNECT

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

At the heart of CFE are four elements: Collaborate, Cultivate, Convene and Connect. During the Collaborate phase, CFE uses teams and greater collaboration between systems to involve families and build networks of support. During the Cultivate phase, CFE utilizes different tools that can be used to engage, connect and/or find families. During the Convene phase, families are brought together and are involved in the process using facilitated family meetings. During the Connect phase, the goal is connections and relational or legal permanency; a lifetime network of supportive relationships is formed for the child and their parents.

Learn more at: texascasa.org/what-we-do/collaborative-family-engagement



SUPPORTING POLICIES TO KEEP FAMILIES SAFELY TOGETHER

SUMMARY

CASA volunteers across the state advocate to keep families connected and together when safe and possible. Texas CASA has long supported efforts to keep families safely out of the child welfare system and to quickly reunify children with their families if they have to be removed and enter foster care. There are some current challenges in the State of Texas that make the need to focus on strengthening services for children and families even more crucial.

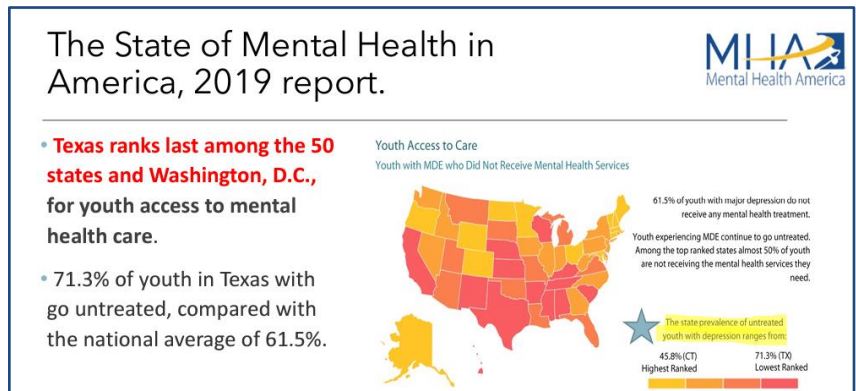
BACKGROUND

When a child is removed from their home, it is extremely traumatic for both the child and their family. The State of Texas should do all it can to provide services, support and resources to children and families to prevent the need for this traumatic intervention.

Inadequate Mental Health Services for Children

Mental Health America shows that Texas ranks last for access to children’s mental health services and ranks 33rd for adult care.¹ 98 percent of the 254 counties in Texas are wholly or partially designated as 'mental health professional shortage areas.'¹ The shortages have gotten so dire that many families turn to the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) to take care of their

children when they cannot find mental healthcare for their child. Children should not enter foster care because their parents cannot find or access needed care for their children. Further, 44% of children without placement in June 2024 entered care because their parents could not find mental health services for them.² This is because DFPS does not have access to services beyond those that are available to families in communities. In addition, many of the children who enter foster care to receive mental health services were previously adopted out of foster care and their families have exhausted or do not know how to access post-adoptive services. Children may also experience intensified mental health needs amid continued trauma and instability once in foster care. Texas must strengthen access to and funding for mental health and disability services in communities to ensure that children and youth can receive the help they need to remain stable, heal and flourish.



Inadequate Services for Families

In Texas, most child removals are due to neglect, most often involving parental substance use,

¹ Source : <https://sph.uth.edu/research/centers/dell/legislative-initiatives/RPC-LL-Babatope-FINAL.pdf>

² Source: https://www.dfps.texas.gov/Child_Protection/State_Care/documents/2024_06_CWOP_Agency_Actions_Visual.pdf



mental illness or domestic violence. Geographic location, workforce shortages or logistical barriers may hinder access to these services. In many cases, the child welfare system has become the mental health provider of last resort for both children and families. If more resources and interventions became available across communities, many more families could stay safely together and avoid the costly interaction with the child welfare system.

Alternative Response Expansion

Child Protective Investigations (CPI) plays a crucial role in safeguarding children. However, the traditional approach to investigations often breeds apprehension within families, resulting in a reluctance to collaborate with investigators or participate in services that can keep children safe at home with their families.³ The Alternative Response (AR) approach offers a more supportive and flexible solution, helping families address their challenges without the stigma, anxiety or long-term consequences associated with traditional CPI investigations. CPI staff will screen reports of abuse or neglect to determine AR eligibility. In an AR case, the caseworker will schedule a meeting directly with the family and encourage the family to invite their support system to the meeting. Instead of focusing on whether a reported incident constitutes abuse, the AR caseworker focuses on assessing the family's needs and identifying solutions within the family's support system and community resources to help prevent the removal of the children. If necessary, an AR case is escalated to a traditional investigation to keep a child safe.

A pilot in Region 10 (El Paso) launched in February 2024 extends AR services to children of all ages. Since the launch of the pilot, El Paso has increased the percentage of Priority 2 cases (i.e., cases with no immediate risk of serious harm or death) that are handled through AR from 20% to 50%, showing that many families with young kids could benefit from this less intrusive approach.⁴

POLICY POSITION

Texas CASA supports policies that preserve families, promote family reunification when possible and minimize the time children spend in foster care.

Texas CASA Supports:

1. Funding additional family preservation services, including evidence-based programs for parenting skills, in-home wrap-around services, behavioral health and substance use treatment
2. Increased funding for and increased utilization of post-adoption supports to provide stability and prevent foster care reentry
3. Policies and funding efforts to increase mental health services in communities for both children and families, with a particular focus on increasing services in rural areas of Texas
4. Monitoring the impact of the statewide scaling of the Alternative Response pilot in Region 10

³ Source: Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. Alternative Response in Texas. (2024). https://www.dfps.texas.gov/Investigations/alternative_response.asp

⁴ Source: Nicole Williams. (2024, May 23). Alternative Response and Region 10 Alternative Response Expansion Pilot [Presentation]. Child Protection Roundtable May 2024 Meeting, Austin, TX, USA [virtual]



SUPPORTING ACCESS TO SAFE, STABLE PLACEMENTS IN COMMUNITIES

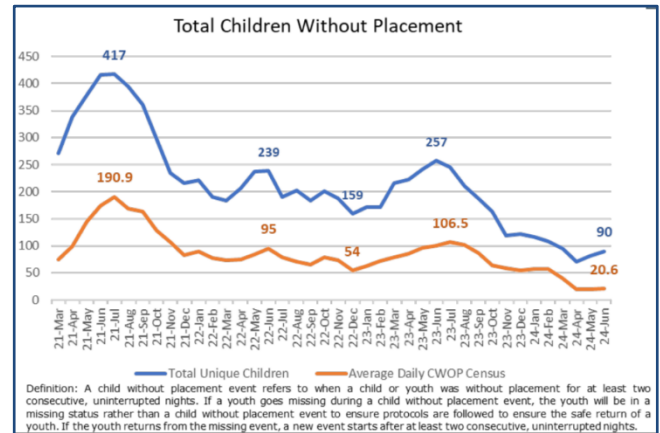
BACKGROUND

When a child is removed from their home, they often experience considerable grief and loss. In addition to being removed from their parents, the child no longer has access to their belongings, pets, friends, neighborhood relationships or the familiarity of their surroundings. If the child needs to be placed in a licensed foster home or facility, rather than with a non-custodial parent or kinship caregiver, the trauma the child experiences is compounded because of the numerous changes they may experience. When the State is named temporary or permanent managing conservator of a child or youth, Child Protective Services (CPS) or Single Source Continuum Contractor (SSCC) staff become responsible for selecting a placement which keeps the child safe, supports the child’s permanency plan and best meets the child’s needs.⁵

Current Challenges

In recent years, the State of Texas has experienced challenges in recruiting and maintaining licensed foster homes and facilities that can meet the needs of children and youth in foster care. In addition, the state has responded to reports of unsafe placements through increased investigations, closures of unsafe facilities and increased oversight and monitoring by state officials. These efforts have significantly decreased the number of foster care placements available for children and youth, particularly those with significant mental and behavioral challenges.

When an appropriate placement is not available, children and youth are temporarily housed in settings such as hotels and rented spaces that are unlicensed and ill-equipped to keep them safe, let alone address their trauma and help them heal. The Department of Family and Protective Services has made great strides in reducing the number of young people without placement, but the challenge is on-going.⁶ Children and youth without placement are at the greatest risk of running away from care, which makes them incredibly vulnerable to trafficking and other negative outcomes.



Increased Risk for Human Trafficking

Research from The University of Texas at Austin estimated that 25% of those in foster care are considered at risk for sex trafficking.⁷ Other national studies have put that number anywhere from 25% to 90%, which highlights the scale of the problem and the need to provide education and

⁵ Source: http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/handbooks/CPS/Resource_Guides/Placement_Process_Resource_Guide.pdf.

⁶ Source: https://www.dfps.texas.gov/Child_Protection/State_Care/default.asp

⁷ Source: Busch-Armendariz PhD, LMSW, MPA, N., Nale MSW, N., Kammer-Kerwick PhD, et al. (2016). Human trafficking by the numbers: The initial benchmark of prevalence and economic impact for Texas. The University of Texas School of Social Work.



intervention for youth in foster care. Due to the circumstances of out-of-home placements, youth in the child welfare system are often the targets of sex traffickers.⁸ Youth experiencing homelessness, poverty, substance abuse, neglect, physical violence, sexual abuse and/or involvement in the juvenile justice system are also at greater risk of exploitation, and each of these factors also increases a youth’s likelihood of involvement in the child welfare system.

Recognizing the need to increase the number of safe and appropriate foster care placements, the Texas Legislature made a historic investment in foster care rates during the 88th Legislative Session. The Texas Child-Centered Care System (T3C) represents a complete transformation of the foster care system. It replaces the Service Level System, with a universal child assessment tool and placement process, twenty-four clearly defined Service Packages and three Add-On Services, new fully funded rate methodology, and new opportunities to claim federal funds for foster care services.⁹ Most importantly, T3C is designed to improve safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes, offer continued opportunity for foster care system improvement through a robust Continuous Quality Assurance and Improvement Process, and lessen the need to look outside the established foster care continuum for services.

POLICY POSITION

Texas CASA supports funding and policies that provide a child with access to safe, stable placements in their community that meet their individual needs and support their permanency goals.

Texas CASA Supports:

1. Policies and funding to support the successful implementation of the Texas Child-Centered Care System (T3C)
2. Ongoing monitoring of the number of children without placement and the policy solutions being implemented by the Department of Family and Protective Services
3. Efforts to keep children placed close to their home communities
4. Policies aimed at improving processes and increasing resources to locate at-risk youth who run away from their placements
5. Efforts to prevent case dismissal when children are on runaway status
6. Funding for a regional staffing model for the Department of Family and Protective Services Human Trafficking and Child Exploitation Division to help better combat human trafficking of children experiencing foster care

⁸ Source: Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2017, July). Human trafficking and child welfare: A guide for caseworkers. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children’s Bureau. https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/trafficking_caseworkers.pdf

⁹ Source: https://www.dfps.texas.gov/Texas_Child_Centered_Care/documents/2024_04_t3c_blueprint.pdf



SUPPORTING & ENCOURAGING PLACEMENT WITH RELATIVE CAREGIVERS

SUMMARY

Kinship placements allow children in the child welfare system to be placed with family members or other caring adults close to them. This can greatly improve their experience in foster care, keeping them closer to their communities and loved ones. While there are benefits to kinship care for the child, kinship caregivers may also face challenges, which can sometimes prevent or disrupt placement.

BACKGROUND

When a child is removed from their home, they can be placed in a foster home or a group facility, but the preferred placement is with someone with whom the child already has a strong relationship. This is called kinship care.



What Is a Kinship Caregiver?

There are several qualifications needed for someone to serve as a kinship caregiver. They must have:

- A significant relationship with the parents or child;
- A shared history during which the caregiver has observed the child's development; and
- Knowledge of the child's family composition, dynamics, experiences and values.

The kinship caregiver is not required to be related to the child. A kinship caregiver who is not related to the child is known as a "fictive" kinship caregiver. Individuals who could be kinship caregivers include grandparents, aunts, uncles, godparents, family friends, counselors or teachers. In FY 2023, approximately 34% of children in foster care in Texas were placed with kinship caregivers.¹⁰

Benefits to Children

There are many benefits for a child when they are placed with a kinship caregiver rather than placed in a traditional foster home. These benefits include:

- The child will experience less trauma and have a greater feeling of stability;
- Sibling groups are more likely to stay together;
- The child is more likely to remain within their community of origin, typically allowing them to remain in their school and maintain connections to their cultural identity; and
- Once a child in kinship care exits the foster care system, they are less likely to re-enter.¹¹

¹⁰ https://www.dfps.texas.gov/About_DFPS/Data_Book/Child_Protective_Services/Placements/Substitute_Care_on_Aug_31.asp.

¹¹ Source: http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/handbooks/CPS/Resource_Guides/Services_to_Kinship_Caregivers_Resource_Guide.pdf.



Barriers to Kinship Care

While there are significant benefits to kinship care, kinship caregivers also face many challenges, which can sometimes prevent or disrupt placement. Challenges include:

Childcare: Subsidized childcare may be available for kinship caregivers but can take a long time to organize and is dependent on the caregiver's employment status, the age of the child and what other assistance the caregiver receives.¹²

Licensing Challenges: Kinship caregivers can get licensed by the state, which makes them eligible to receive many more benefits, including significantly more financial assistance. These benefits also include more robust case management to help them access services, manage challenging behavior, etc. However, the process to become licensed is time consuming, requiring at least 20 hours of annual training, an in-depth home evaluation, a fire inspection and greater caseworker involvement. This enhanced scrutiny can deter kinship caregivers from pursuing a foster care license despite the additional benefits offered.¹³ Texas has the opportunity to create a simpler, kinship-specific licensing process, which should alleviate some of these concerns.¹⁴

POLICY POSITION

Texas CASA supports funding and policies that further support and encourage placement with relative caregivers.

Texas CASA Supports:

1. Legislation, riders or budget items that will increase the daily reimbursement rate for kinship caregivers
2. Increased funding for concrete services
3. Decreased requirements and expanded funding to allow kinship caregivers to have access to childcare and respite care
4. Implementation of new licensing standards for relative or kinship foster family homes in Texas

¹² Source: https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/handbooks/cps/files/CPS_pg_8235.asp.

¹³ Source: https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/adoption_and_foster_care/get_started/requirements.asp.

¹⁴ Source: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/policy-guidance/im-23-07>.



IMPROVING SERVICES AND SUPPORTS FOR OLDER YOUTH EXITING CARE

BACKGROUND

Older youth in foster care, including those at risk of exiting care at 18, face extremely difficult challenges. Youth who exit foster care at 18 are often not prepared for adulthood and, as such, have disproportionately adverse outcomes compared to young people their age who did not leave the foster care system at 18.¹⁵ Some of these outcomes include:

- higher pregnancy and incarceration rates before the age of 21,
- lower likelihood of completing high school with a diploma,
- higher likelihood of experiencing homelessness,
- lower likelihood of having an ID or driver’s license,
- higher likelihood of being underemployed or unemployed, and
- higher likelihood of experiencing physical and mental health challenges.

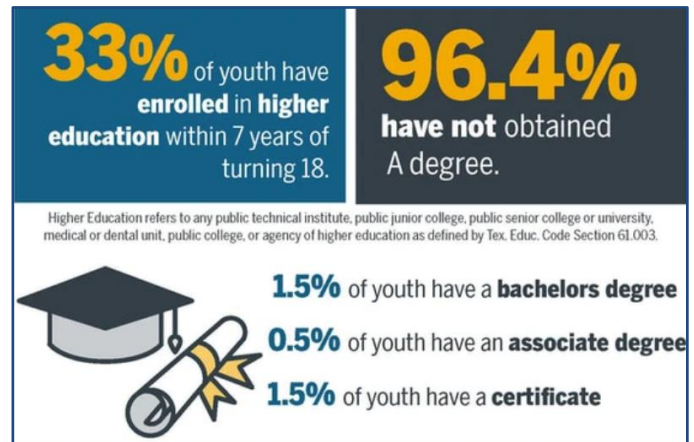
Investments Needed

In 2021, the Department of Family and Protective Services’ Transitional Living Services budget was cut, affecting crucial services for older youth in foster care. Although funding from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) temporarily supplemented this cut, the expiration of this funding left a gap. In FY 2023, about 18 percent of children in foster care are aged 14 or older.¹⁶ Restoring funding for transitional living services will ensure that more youth receive the support they need to be successful in adulthood.

Texas also needs to ensure that young adults, ages 18-21, who choose to remain in extended foster care have a variety of safe and appropriate housing options, including supervised independent living programs. Although the legislature made historic investments in the rate structure for providers in the child welfare system during the 88th Legislative Session, supervised independent living provider rates were not increased and have not been increased in many years.¹⁷ As the cost of living increases, it is important for Texas to ensure that rates for all foster care placements are bolstered, not just for placements for children under the age of 18.

Post-Secondary Education Challenges

Too few young adults with experience in foster care ever gain access to higher education programs, let alone graduate from college.¹⁸



¹⁵ Source: White, O’Brien, Pecora, et al, (November 2012). *Texas Foster Care Alumni Study Technical Report: Outcomes at Ages 23 and 24*. Casey Family Programs.

¹⁶ Source: https://www.dfps.texas.gov/About_DFPS/Data_Book/Child_Protective_Services/Conservatorship/Activity_on_August_31.asp.

¹⁷ Source: https://www.dfps.texas.gov/Texas_Child_Centered_Care/rates.asp.

¹⁸ Source: <https://www.educationreachfortexans.com/resources>.



Nationally, about 7 percent to 13 percent of students from foster care enroll in higher education. Only about 2 percent obtain bachelor’s or advanced degrees, in contrast to 24 percent of adults in the general population.¹⁹

Youth in foster care often report that few people in their lives ever expected them to attend and succeed in college. These students seldom receive the kind of guidance and stable support needed to succeed in postsecondary education or training. College success can make a lifelong difference.

Texas is one of the few states that exempts or waives payment of tuition and fees at state supported colleges or universities for young adults currently or formerly in the conservatorship of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) and for those adopted from DFPS. However, this incredible benefit is underutilized because young people might not be aware of the benefit or because there are arbitrary age limits on the tuition and fee waiver in statute. Texas should do all it can to eliminate these barriers to help ensure positive outcomes for young adults who experienced foster care.

POLICY POSITION

Texas CASA supports funding and policies that improve services and supports for older youth in foster care and older youth exiting foster care.

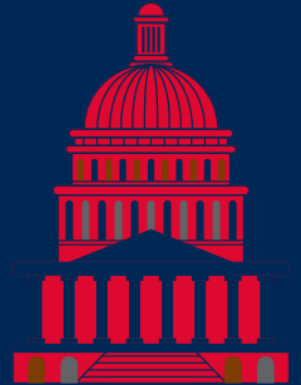
Texas CASA Supports:

1. Increased funding for events, education and other programming for youth in foster care who are older and preparing to exit foster care
2. Increased funding for pre-college activities for youth in foster care, including transportation to college campus events across Texas
3. Increased rates for supervised independent living programs for young adults in extended foster care
4. Removal of the requirement to be age 25 to secure the tuition waiver for youth who exit foster care at 18, as recommended by the Department of Family and Protective Services and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board
5. Removal of the requirement that a young person must have been adopted or in Permanent Managing Conservatorship on or after 2009 to access the tuition and fee waiver for youth who experienced foster care

¹⁹ Source: <https://www.casey.org/supporting-success/>.



SECTION 4: OTHER IMPORTANT CHILD WELFARE INFORMATION



TEXAS CHILD-CENTERED CARE (T3C)

SUMMARY

Texas Child-Centered Care, or T3C, represents a complete transformation of the foster care system. It is the result of a multi-year effort directed by the Texas Legislature, supported by the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) in collaboration with the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC), and guided by countless residential childcare providers and other child welfare stakeholders. The funding for T3C, appropriated by the 88th Legislature in 2023, marks the first time that the rate structure has been updated since 1988.

T3C transforms the foster care system to better align and support the success of Community-Based Care (CBC) by establishing:

- Clearly defined foster care models/service packages;
- New foster care rate methodology;
- A universal screening assessment and placement process to match children to the appropriate services; and
- Opportunities to enhance Title IV-E claiming of federal funds.

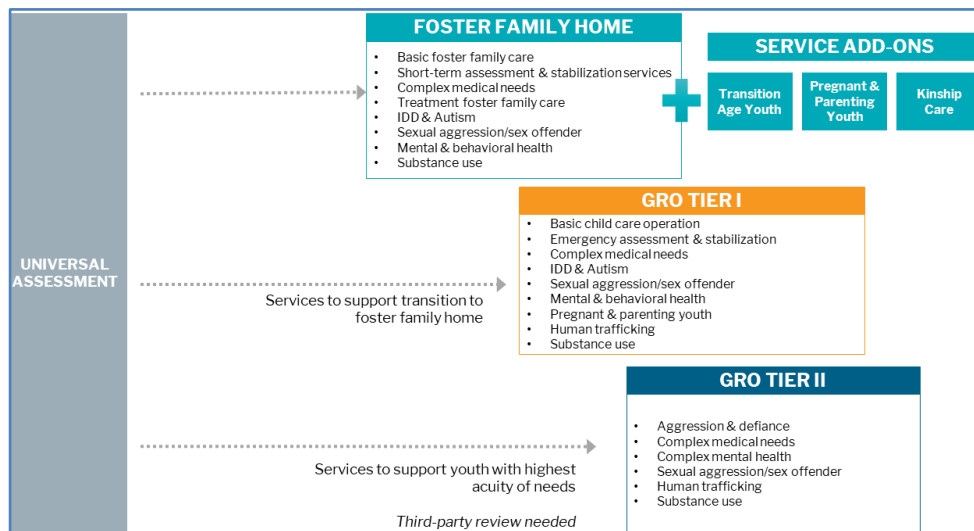
T3C replaces the Service Level System, with a universal child assessment tool and placement process, twenty-four clearly defined Service Packages and three Add-On Services, new fully funded rate methodology, and new opportunities to claim federal funds for foster care services.

The twenty-four Service Packages will include:

- 9 Foster Family Home service packages, with 3 service add-ons
- 9 General Residential Operation Tier 1 service packages
- 6 General Residential Operation Tier 2 service packages

Additionally, all children & youth will receive a uniform modified version of the CANS assessment and will be assigned to only one service package.

This new rate methodology offers more efficiency and eliminates the need for multiple payments by consolidating compensation for things such as awake night supervision in General Residential Operations into the child’s daily rate. The new service array offers new opportunities for the state to



draw down federal Title IV-E funding by incorporating specific packages that align with changes made by the Family First Prevention Services Act, allowing for enhanced claiming.

IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE

- Infrastructure & System Readiness: June 2023 – December 2024
- Transition of Services & Children: January 2025 – August 2027
- Full Implementation & Refinement: September 2027

DFPS is currently working with stakeholders to execute a thorough project and implementation plan as they prepare for the transition of services and children in January 2025. During the transition (January 2025 – August 2027) to T3C, children, youth, and young adults will be served under four different funding structures which include the following:

- The CBC Blended Foster Care System
- The CBC T3C System
- The Legacy Service Level System
- The Legacy T3C System

DFPS has developed the T3C Blueprint which is a guide to help stakeholders understand the framework and parameters for T3C's service packages and add-on services. DFPS intends for this Blueprint to be a living document that will be regularly updated as the primary way to communicate changes and modifications for continued improvement. The current and previous versions of the Blueprint will be available on the T3C page on the DFPS website: https://www.dfps.texas.gov/Texas_Child_Centered_Care/T3C_System_Blueprint.asp

If you have any questions or feedback related to the T3C System or the Blueprint, you can reach out to dfpstexaschildcenteredcare@dfps.texas.gov



COMMUNITY-BASED CARE

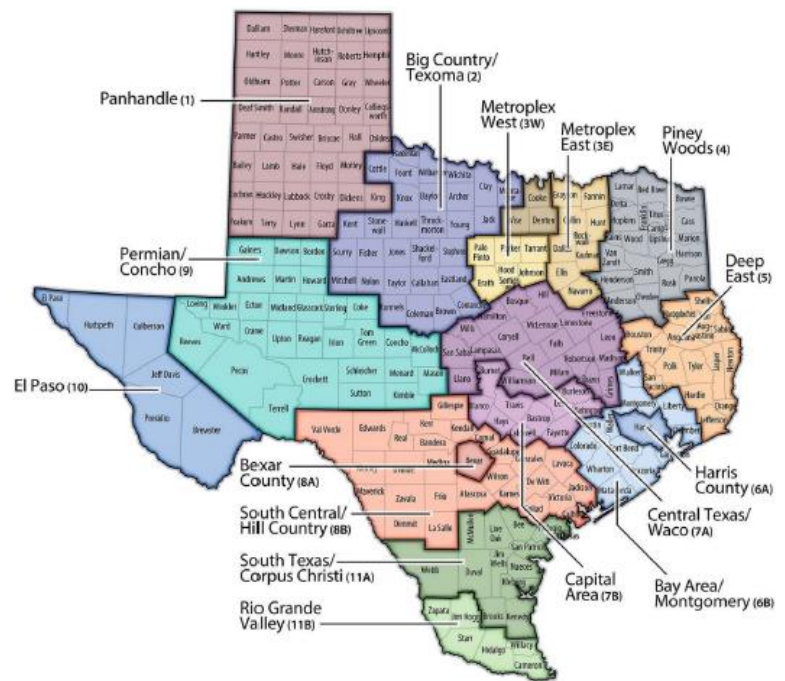
In 2017, in an effort to improve outcomes for children in the state’s care, the 85th Texas Legislature enacted Senate Bill 11, which created a change model known as Community-Based Care (CBC). CBC shifts key functions and services from CPS to private, nonprofit contractors, known as Single Source Continuum Contractors (SSCCs), in a staged process. Under CBC, the SSCC is responsible for developing a network of placement options, finding living arrangements for children, and providing other contractually required services. CBC is being implemented one area in the state at a time, and the array of services a contracted provider delivers rolls out in stages.

DFPS selects catchment areas for procurement on a staggered basis. New catchment area procurements and expansion of CBC into Stages II and III are planned according to legislative funding and the Department of Family and Protective Service’s budgetary capacity. For more information on CBC, check out the third edition of Texas CASA’s CBC Guide:

<https://texascasa.org/resources/community-based-care-guide/>

Within each catchment area, DFPS and SSCCs will implement CBC in three stages.

- In Stage I, the SSCC will develop a network of services and provide foster care placement services. The focus is to improve the overall well-being of children in foster care and keep them closer to home and their communities.
- In Stage II, the SSCC will provide case management, kinship and reunification services. The focus of this stage is to expand the continuum of services to include services for families and to increase permanency outcomes for children.
- In Stage III, the SSCC will begin to see financial incentives and remedies tied to their performance on reducing the number of days children spend in paid foster care.



These transitions will change who CASA programs collaborate with on CPS cases, as SSCC employees assume roles and duties previously carried out by CPS caseworkers.



THE IMPORTANCE OF CASA DURING THE TRANSITION TO CBC

As new Single Source Continuum Contractors (SSCCs) begin CBC implementation, it will be important for CASA advocates to continue to serve as a consistent figure in a child's life regardless of the systemic changes happening behind the scenes.

BUILDING A QUALITY PROVIDER NETWORK

CASA programs can support SSCCs in developing and maintaining a quality provider network. CASA often knows the providers in their region and can offer the SSCCs important feedback about placements. SSCCs will rely on the knowledge and experience of their local CASA programs as they work to establish a strong community network during Stage I.

ENSURING CONTINUED SUPPORT

Under state law, CPS and SSCCs are supposed to consult with CASA on placement decisions. However, CASA may face a logistical challenge in Stage I, when a program is working with two agencies and two sets of contacts: the SSCC for placement and CPS for case management. It will be important that volunteers are supported in managing this additional layer of complexity and understand who is responsible for what when it comes to decision-making and advocacy for children and families.

AIDING IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF PLANS

As SSCCs prepare for Stage II of CBC, they are required to develop a community engagement plan and an implementation plan. Local CASA program leadership or staff should reach out to their SSCCs and offer to participate in the development of these plans during Stage I. Additionally, SSCCs are required to develop and publicly post an operations manual for their service area 60 days prior to beginning Stage II. CASA programs should request a copy of this manual and help staff become familiar with new case manager practices and protocols.

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR COLLABORATION

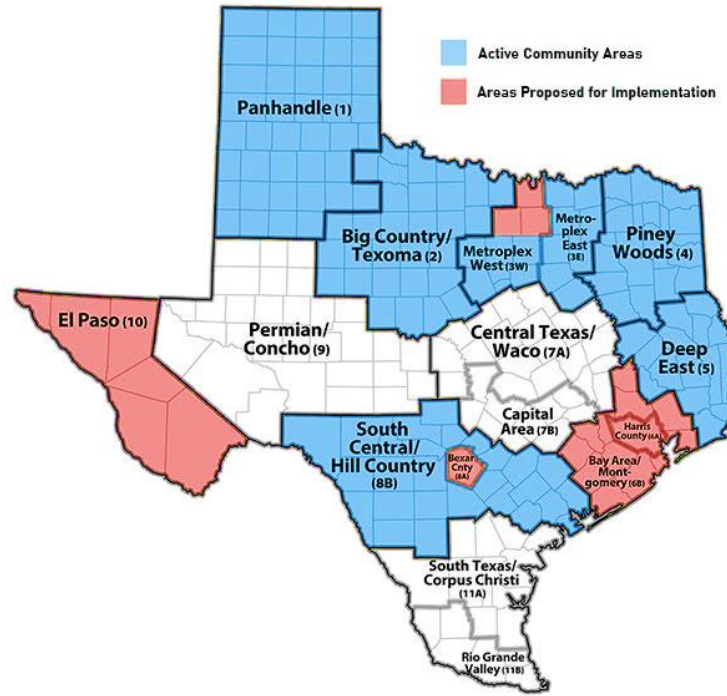
CASA programs should offer to host meetings, create cross-training opportunities, and offer other types of support as SSCCs transition to Stage II. CASA can provide significant support to children, their families, and SSCCs during the transition when case management services shift from CPS to the SSCC. The transition from Stage I to Stage II can be difficult so it is important for CASA to collaborate with SSCCs as much as possible to ensure families and children don't fall through the cracks. It is crucial to take on the responsibility CASA has as the child's advocate in contributing to the success of the transition.

STAYING FLEXIBLE

CASA programs will benefit from staying flexible, open, and positive during the time of transition. A successful CBC model depends on everyone working together to promote improved care and positive outcomes for children and families experiencing the foster care system.



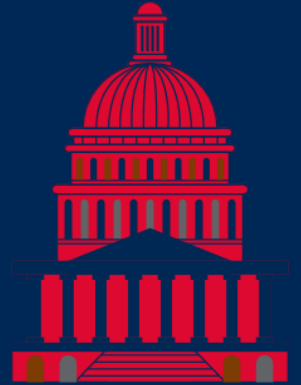
COMMUNITY-BASED CARE MAP AND TIMELINE



Region	SSCC	Current Status	Next Step
3W – Metroplex West	Our Community Our Kids (OCOK)	Stage III (Denton, Cooke, and Wise Counties are live in Stage II)	Ongoing monitoring & Stage III for Denton, Cooke, and Wise Counties
2 – Big Country & Texoma	2Ingage	Stage III	Ongoing monitoring
1 – Panhandle	St. Francis	Stage III	Ongoing monitoring
8B – South Central & Hill Country	BELONG	Stage III	Ongoing monitoring
3E – Metroplex East	EMPOWER	Stage II	Stage III
4 – Piney Woods	4Kids4Families	Stage II	Stage III
5 – Deep East	Texas Family Care Network	Stage II	Stage III



SECTION 5: LAT TO-DO'S *BEFORE* SESSION



LAT TO-DOS *BEFORE* SESSION

The most important thing CASA programs can do *BEFORE* session is identify staff, board members and volunteers who are interested in legislative advocacy and can tell their personal CASA story. Once you have a LAT team chosen and assembled, identify your local legislators and schedule a meeting. Try to match legislators with volunteers who are their constituents to maximize the legislator's investment and interest in meeting with them.

BEFORE THE MEETING

- Prepare your meeting agenda and packet of information and determine who will present each issue. Be sure to practice your talking points.

IN THE MEETING:

- Use the opportunity to start building a relationship with the legislator and/or their staff. Establishing and cultivating relationships with staff is just as important as knowing your legislator.
- Share stories about the impact of your local CASA program without using identifying information about children and families.
- Bring a packet of information about your program with your contact information included.
- Be sure to thank them for any previous support of CASA or the child welfare system.
- If you already have an established relationship, begin to share specific information about Texas CASA funding and legislative priorities.

AFTER THE MEETING:

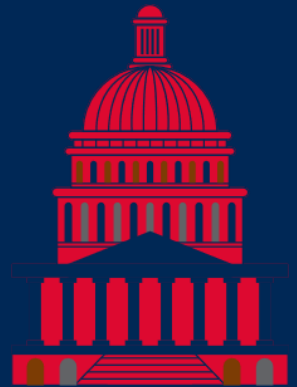
- Send a thank you card or email to the legislative office and include any follow-information requested.
- Send any relevant information you learned to the Public Policy Team at Texas CASA.

Create opportunities to interact with your legislators to build relationships, increase awareness and reinforce their knowledge of CASA. Consider some of the following ways to build relationships and goodwill for your program:

- Invite legislators and their staff to observe CASA volunteers in court hearings.
- Invite them as a special guest to an event, such as a volunteer appreciation dinner or a swearing-in ceremony.
- Invite them to tour your office or to meet with volunteers at your office.
- Send them your newsletter or annual report.
- Send them information about child welfare statistics and stories in their communities.



SECTION 6: LAT TO-DO'S *DURING SESSION*



LAT TO-DOS *DURING* SESSION

The most important thing CASA programs can do *DURING* session is stay up to date on key child welfare legislation and funding items, particularly CASA priorities. Texas CASA makes this easy for you to do by hosting bi-weekly zoom meetings with updates for the network, by publishing a bill tracker on the Texas CASA website and by updating newsletters and the Texas CASA LAT Facebook page regularly.

ACTION ALERTS

As a member of a Legislative Advocacy Team, you will likely receive an action alert from the Texas CASA Public Policy team during the legislative session. Responding to these action alerts is a keyway for you to utilize the relationships you built with your legislators during the interim.

Texas CASA will send you an email when one of your legislators is going to be voting on an important bill or funding item. We will send a summary of the legislation or funding item, along with an explanation of why the legislation is important to CASA and the current contact information for your legislator and their Capitol staff. You should feel free to tailor the messaging based on your relationship or local statistics but be sure to make the key points we send. An email from a constituent makes a direct impact on a legislator's voting decision and greatly increases CASA's likelihood of success during the legislative session.

Please note that action alerts generally require a fast turnaround, so be sure to check your CASA email regularly during the session in order to participate.

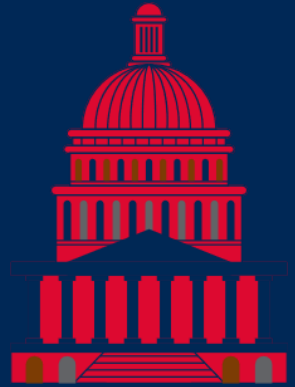
CAPITOL DAY AND IN-PERSON ACTION IN AUSTIN

Another important way you may want to participate in legislative advocacy during the legislative session is to participate in CASA Day at the Capitol. This is an important opportunity to demonstrate the size and strength of the CASA network and to collaborate with other local CASA programs to meet with your local legislators and their Capitol staff. This event creates goodwill for the CASA network and keeps our message and priorities fresh on the minds of legislators who are busy and pulled in many directions during the session.

Additionally, Texas CASA may need in-person support from local CASA staff or volunteers during hearings about key legislation or funding items. No one is more effective at sharing the CASA story than the people doing the work across Texas, so there may be opportunities for in-person meetings or testimony outside of CASA Day at the Capitol. If you have expertise or a story to share related to one of CASA's legislative priorities and are interested in providing testimony at a hearing during session, please reach out to the Public Policy team and let us know!



SECTION 7: LAT TO-DO'S *AFTER* SESSION



LAT TO-DOS AFTER SESSION

EDUCATE

Attend one of Texas CASA's Post-Session trainings or watch the Legislative Session Wrap-Up Webinar. Educate yourself on what occurred during session and how that will impact your local program. Whether the changes made during the legislative session were small or large, it is important to take the time to educate yourself to make sure that you are aware of newly enacted legislation that may impact your staff and your volunteers.

NAVIGATE

Work to implement new legislation within your program. Train your staff and volunteers on any new requirements that will impact them. It may take time to adjust to new laws and ensuring that staff and volunteers are trained is the best way to swiftly navigate through change and guarantee compliance.

THINK

After you have adjusted to the changes that follow each legislative session, start to think about what additional changes would benefit your program or the children and families you serve. Texas CASA begins to work on its policy priorities during the Spring before each legislative session, so it is important to brainstorm what could be impactful to your program and community so your program can participate in Texas CASA's planning process ahead of the next session.

CULTIVATE

It is essential to continue to develop and cultivate relationships with your legislators and their staff during the interim. Reach out and thank your local legislators for their support of CASA funding or legislative priorities during the session. A personal "thank you" note or email is not something that legislators often get from their constituents and goes a long way toward building or maintaining goodwill. Think about opportunities to involve your legislators in the work that your program already does in your community, like inviting them to a court hearing, swearing-in ceremony or annual gala. Making your legislator feel directly involved in your work on behalf of children and families can create a positive long-term benefit for your program and the CASA network.

ENGAGE

As you are cultivating relationships, educating yourself & your program, and thinking about new priorities, it is essential to engage your LAT volunteers. Continuing to hold LAT meetings during the interim helps boost and maintain your team's enthusiasm for advocacy. Additionally, your LAT members could have ideas for furthering legislative relationships or potential policy priorities for the next legislative session.

REACH OUT

Reach out to the Texas CASA Public Policy Team! We are here to help you and your program before, during, and after each legislative session. Whether you want to talk about a new law that was passed or a potential policy priority, Texas CASA is here to help and answer any questions.



SECTION 8: LAT TO-DON'TS



LAT TO-DON'TS

SPEAKING IN ONE VOICE

When you are serving as a LAT, you are amplifying the legislative policies that have been established by the Texas CASA Board of Directors to impact the child welfare system. These priorities are inclusive of recommendations from local CASA programs. It is important for programs to be unified in their messages with legislators because deviating from them could unintentionally cause confusion or even harm to CASA's reputation and credibility. The strength of CASA's impact at the Capitol comes from local CASA programs' relationships with their legislators, so it is important to remember that you are part of a network of 74 local CASA programs and that your actions could have an impact on the credibility of the entire CASA network in Texas. Additionally, while seeking private funding and competitive grants is encouraged, local CASA programs should not seek state or federal funding directly from the Texas Legislature.

WORKING WITH LOCAL LEGISLATORS

Your influence as a LAT exists in part because you are a constituent of your local legislators. You can best tell the story of how CASA impacts the children, youth and families in their district. You may at times want to use your influence in other parts of the state. However, because LATs are specific to legislative districts, a LAT should limit their reach to only the legislators who represent their CASA program area. This helps to ensure that each legislator has a relationship with their local CASA program and helps to prevent confusion and frustration in the relationship-building process.

If your LAT receives a request to meet with legislators outside of your local program area, please contact the Texas CASA Public Policy team at publicpolicy@texascasa.org and we will put them in touch with the appropriate CASA program.

MAINTAINING CREDIBILITY

Remember that you do not have to be an expert on every topic. A legislator's relationship and reliance on you as a trusted resource and broker of information is very important, so don't feel you need to provide answers if you get asked about something you are unsure about. Instead, offer to get back to them with the answer or connect them with the Texas CASA Public Policy team. Texas CASA can always be a resource to help you find information, and we are happy to follow up with the legislator or we can assist with language that you can use.

Additionally, a legislator or staff person may voice an opinion that you do not agree with. It is important to remain impartial and respectful at all times. If something concerning comes up during a meeting, make note of it and be sure to communicate that information back to the Public Policy team at Texas CASA. If a difficult conversation needs to take place, Texas CASA will have that conversation in order to preserve the important local relationship you have with your legislator and their staff.





LIMITING POLITICAL ACTIVITY

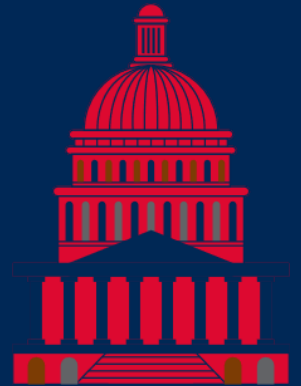
Under the Internal Revenue Code, all non-profit organizations are absolutely prohibited from directly or indirectly participating in, or intervening in, any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for elective public office. This does not prohibit you from being politically involved, but it does prohibit you from identifying yourself as being affiliated with CASA when endorsing or opposing a political candidate.

SUPPORTING OTHER PRIORITIES

If one of your partner organizations requests that you support their priorities or respond to an action alert, your local program may do so, but must be clear that the endorsement is only from the local CASA program. If a representative of your program plans to testify at the Capitol, please notify Texas CASA so that we can be prepared for questions or concerns raised by any members of the legislature.



SECTION 9: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

TEXAS CASA LATS FACEBOOK PAGE

www.facebook.com/groups/TXCASALATS

TEXAS CASA LATS INFORMATION PAGE

<https://texascasa.org/what-we-do/leadership-in-public-policy/#lats>

THE CASA VOICE

Browse and subscribe at texascasa.org/news-and-events/the-casa-voice

WHO REPRESENTS ME?

www.fyi.legis.state.tx.us

TEXAS LEGISLATURE ONLINE

Statutes, legislation, reports, committees, hearings, etc. at www.capitol.state.tx.us

CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES HANDBOOK AND RESIDENTIAL CHILD CARE LICENSING HANDBOOK

Policies with references to laws and regulations at www.dfps.state.tx.us/handbooks/CPS/default.asp

HOW A BILL PROGRESSES THROUGH THE LEGISLATURE

www.tlc.texas.gov/docs/legref/legislativeprocess.pdf

HOW TO FOLLOW A BILL THROUGH THE PROCESS

www.legis.state.tx.us/resources/followabill.aspx

TEXAS TRIBUNE

Bios and directories of legislators, updates on the session, data on legislative issues
www.texastribune.org

TEXAS CASA

Contact the Texas CASA Public Policy team at publicpolicy@texascasa.org

