TEXASCASA
Court Appointed Special Advocates
FOR CHILDREN

CASA MESSAGING BOOK:

SPEAKING IN ONE VOICE

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FOR CHILDREN

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LETTER FROM THE CEO

Dear CASA network,

To keep the momentum moving, we have developed the CASA Messaging Book to help all programs speak in the same, strong voice. By having a consistent message across the network, we can maximize CASA awareness and better reach and engage current and new volunteers, sponsors, employees, board members and community partners, as well as the children and families we work with.

Throughout the Messaging Book, you will see side-by-side comparison and examples of past, outdated wording versus new wording. These changes reflect the shift in our communications to be more family focused. As the child welfare system evolves and best practices change, language around supporting families and fostering connections will become more and more important. We want to ensure we are speaking in a way that encourages engagement.

Your words matter. The messages of one program affect all programs. We hope that this Messaging Book will establish a common CASA language that we can all use moving forward. We recommend that after reviewing the Messaging Book, you take the time to review your materials and website for any outdated wording that will need to be updated.

The CASA Way says that we have an uncompromising belief that we will achieve what others think is impossible, and each of us is an essential part of the solution. Together we can and will create a brighter future for all Texas children and their families.

Thank you for all that you have done and will continue to do for our shared mission.

VICKI SPRIGGS
TEXAS CASA CEO

CORE MESSAGING

This wording sets the foundation for our messaging when it comes to recruitment, fundraising and working with stakeholders.

We encourage you to emphasize these three main tenets at every opportunity:

- **CASA volunteers support children and families involved in the child welfare system,**
- **CASA volunteers increase the well-being of the children in foster care, and**
- **CASA programs are of, and for, the communities we serve.**

Previously, CASA programs have offered statements and statistics about reunification and adoption to show the impact of our presence on a case. However, recent research informed us that it's not so easy to measure, or achieve, those results. In response, we determined what is certain about a CASA volunteer's presence:

CASA VOLUNTEERS SUPPORT CHILDREN AND FAMILIES INVOLVED IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM.

- We provide a consistent presence for the child and family
- We facilitate nurturing relationships for the child
- We help find, engage and strengthen a support network for the child and family
- We focus on one or two cases at a time

CASA VOLUNTEERS INCREASE THE WELL-BEING OF THE CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE.

- We take a trauma-informed approach
- We address mental, physical and educational needs
- We work to ensure children's safety while in foster care
- We help keep children connected to their community and family
- We advocate to keep families connected and together when safe and possible

CASA PROGRAMS ARE OF, AND FOR, THE COMMUNITY.

- CASA volunteers are everyday people who support children and families in crisis
- CASA volunteers work for the health and well-being of the community
- CASA volunteers bring a unique level of dedication to children, families and communities
- CASA volunteers are well-trained and supervised by professionals
- CASA volunteers are appointed by their local courts

TAGLINE & KEY PHRASES

Every child has a chance – it's you.®

CASA volunteers support children and families involved in the child welfare system.

CASA volunteers increase the well-being of the children in foster care.

CASA programs are of, and for, the communities we serve.

CASA volunteers are assigned to one or two cases at a time, focusing on one or two children or sibling groups and their family.

CASA volunteers advocate for the best interest of the children they serve.

CASA volunteers help reestablish healthy family connections.

CASA volunteers and the caseworkers* collaborate to reunite families.

CASA volunteers provide a consistent presence in a child's life during their time in foster care.

CASA volunteers work to ensure the child is and feels safe during their time in foster care.

CASA volunteers stay by the child's side throughout the duration of the case, working to ensure the child's and family's needs are met.

A CASA volunteer for every child.

**If your service area is a part of Community-Based Care, the term caseworker can be replaced with the term used by the Single Source Continuum Contractor, e.g. Our Community. Our Kids. refers to caseworkers as permanency specialists.*

NOTE: According to National CASA standards, when using the CASA name avoid using "CASA" as a noun. For example, instead of referring to volunteers as "CASAs", say "CASA volunteers," or instead of referring to the program as "CASA", say "CASA program", especially in formal writing and published materials. If the term CASA were to become a generic noun, we would no longer be able to prevent others from using it.

TRANSFORMING OUR VOCABULARY

Over time, we have grown and transformed in our understanding of how best to support children and families. We have also grown in understanding how to position ourselves as a truly collaborative partner helping to connect the dots between systems and services. The role of a CASA volunteer has not changed, but how we practice and approach our advocacy has.

The child welfare system has also grown, in recent years, to understand the crucial importance of family bonds, the trauma caused by removal and separation and the benefit of having a lifetime network of connections from within a child's own community. It has also shifted to recognize the humility required by any individual or organization working to bring positive interventions into a family's life. ***We want our language to reflect this growth in all these areas***.

With those changes in mind, we have taken a look at our more detailed messaging, the ways that we discuss our role, what we do to fulfill our role of representing best interest and the ways we refer to the children, parents and families we serve.

In the next few pages, we outline wording that we consider outdated, offer suggestions for new wording and explain the reasons.

Please read these with an open mind, and consider how you might revise your materials and talking points to adopt the more updated language being proposed here.

NOTE: This is not an extensive, full list of all CASA messaging and talking points. This book is meant to be a launching point showcasing the direction Texas CASA messaging is moving towards.

OUTDATED WORDING & NEW/CURRENT LANGUAGE

What Does a CASA Volunteer Do?

When talking with potential volunteers and donors, as well as with anyone involved in a case like the parents, family and teachers, it's important that we are accurately describing the role of a CASA volunteer. Even among volunteers, there is some confusion around what is and isn't within their role. Here, we've outlined a few of the key actions that CASA volunteers do to support children and families.

A CASA volunteer works to:

- **Identify and address risks to the child's safety and well-being,**
- **Identify supportive people in the child's life that they can work with to promote safety and well-being for the child during their time in foster care,**
- **Ensure appropriate physical and mental health assessments are completed and that the child's needs are understood by the family and everyone involved in the case through a trauma-informed approach, and**
- **Verify educational assessments are completed and educational supports are in place.**

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.	

ADDITIONAL WORDING

CASA volunteers advocate for the best interest of a child and make informed recommendations for the child's physical and emotional well-being to the judge.

How Does a CASA Volunteer Make a Difference?

Until the CASA network has consistent, sound data, messaging around the difference CASA volunteers make should be based on qualitative information like stories and testimonials. This approach puts more emphasis on the ways CASA volunteers aim to help children and families.

OUTDATED	NEW/CURRENT
Children with a CASA volunteer: • *Spend less time in care* • *Have fewer placements* • *Are less likely to age out of care* • *Move through the system more quickly* • *Are more likely to find a permanent home* • *Are more likely to be reunified (end up with their family)*	**A CASA volunteer works to ensure a child's best interest is being met by:** • **Identifying and addressing risks to the child's safety and well-being,** • **Identifying supportive people in the child's life that they can work with to promote safety and well-being for the child during their time in care,** • **Ensuring appropriate physical and mental health assessments are completed and that the child's needs are understood by the family and everyone involved in the case through a trauma-informed approach, and** • **Verifying educational assessments are completed and educational supports are in place.**

RATIONALE: Texas CASA has moved away from language that infers CASA volunteer advocacy causes specific outcomes that are actually decisions of the court. The updated language on the right focuses on the CASA advocate's behaviors that facilitate better outcomes for children and families.

How Does a CASA Volunteer Make a Difference?

OUTDATED	NEW/CURRENT
CASA volunteers work to find children a safe, permanent home. *AND* *Find a forever family/forever home.*	**CASA volunteers stay by a child's side throughout the case, advocating first for reunification when safe and possible.** **If reunification is not safe or possible, CASA volunteers will advocate for the child to be adopted by, or live with, other relatives or family friends. If that is also not possible, CASA volunteers will work towards adoption by a non-relative.** **No matter what, CASA volunteers will keep in contact with the support network until the case closes so that everyone continues to put the child's best interests first.**
RATIONALE: Children have families no matter the circumstances. As Kevin Campbell would say, "family seeing" vs."finding" allows us to focus on locating, connecting, engaging and supporting the child's parents and family of origin. ***RATIONALE:*** Children's family of origin will always be their family even after adoption.	
CASA volunteers work to move children out of the system as quickly as possible.	**CASA volunteers help maintain a sense of urgency to all children's cases and recognize that permanency (both legal and relational) is essential to well-being.**
RATIONALE: CASA volunteers are in the unique position of having only one or two cases, and as such, are in the best position to keep the case on track and moving forward.	

What Is a CASA Volunteer?

OUTDATED	NEW/CURRENT
CASA volunteers are the only constant in a child's life.	**A CASA volunteer is a consistent presence in a child's life while working collaboratively with others involved in the case.** ***OR*** **A CASA volunteer is a consistent presence in a child's life during their time in foster care.**
RATIONALE: Children need connections in their lives to heal and thrive. A CASA volunteer should not be the only person filling this need for a child. CASA volunteers are an equal partner to caseworkers and attorneys ad litem and respects their relationship and role within the child's life.	
CASA volunteers are the eyes and ears of the judge.	**CASA volunteers provide information through court reports and testimony and make recommendations in the child's best interest to the judge to help them make informed decisions.** ***OR*** **CASA volunteers provide valuable information to the judge and others involved in the case to help ensure a child's best interest is being met.**
RATIONALE: "Eyes and ears" conveys that the CASA volunteer works directly with the judge and sounds, in a sense, like spying. The phrase can lead to mistrust and misunderstanding between the volunteer, the parents and family.	

What Is a CASA Volunteer?

OUTDATED	NEW/CURRENT
CASA volunteers are superheroes.	**CASA volunteers are community members working collaboratively to support children and families involved in the foster care system.** ***OR*** **CASA volunteers are community members advocating for the best interest of children involved in the foster care system.** ***OR*** **CASA volunteers come from different backgrounds, neighborhoods and communities just like the kids they help.**

RATIONALE: Child welfare is a team effort, and the CASA volunteer is one player working with all parties to serve the best interest of children.

ADDITIONAL WORDING

CASA volunteers go through training to learn how to advocate for the best interest of children before being assigned to a case by a judge.

When describing CASA volunteers, please refer to the definition of "advocate" in Title 4, Subtitle C Chapter 93: 93.001 and the definition of "guardian ad litem" using advocate Title 5, Subtitle A, Chapter 107: Sec 107.001.

RESPECTFUL ADVOCACY

The theme throughout this guide is that words matter and hold power. In this case, the words we use can either send the message "you are welcome" or "you are not welcome." From recruiting new volunteers to engaging with parents and families, we want it to be clear that the CASA network is a welcoming network. We also recognize that some of the wording may not be used by all parties involved in the case and is considered standard wording in court reports. We encourage programs to use the new wording with the community and general public and incorporate into court reports as they see fit.

OUTDATED WORDING & NEW/CURRENT LANGUAGE

Working with Parents & Families

CASA volunteers advocate for legal and relational permanency with families. Additionally, as we have heard from the judiciary, attorneys and other stakeholders, the entire child welfare system as a whole is attempting a greater engagement with families. We are all working towards building a more family-focused network to better serve the best interest of children. The overarching goal with family engagement is to help achieve strong connectivity and permanency, preferably reunification or adoption by relatives.

Building on this, CASA programs' wording when engaging parents and families and talking to judges, community partners and volunteers is important, and should be carefully and intentionally considered. Programs should look to use person-first language as well as a resource lens – not a deficit lens. The lens you choose will also influence your work with others involved in the case, as well as any partnerships.

> **"The kids you say you love... their parents were those kids. As change agents, the big change is growth and healing around the adults... If we care about kids, we've got to care about their parents."**
>
> *– Kevin Campbell, Developer of the Family Finding model*

OUTDATED	NEW/CURRENT
Child *Example: CASA volunteers get to know the child…*	**Child, parents and family; Child and family** **Example: CASA volunteers get to know the child, parents and their family…**
RATIONALE: Advocating for a child's best interest means getting to know the child's parents and family. When able, programs should include parents and family in wording to set the expectation from the very beginning that volunteers are there to support children and their parents and families.	
*Birth family/Biological/Bio family** **Can still be used in court reports and when reporting to the judge and other parties.*	**Family**
RATIONALE: Families of various types come into the foster care system and saying bio family excludes some types, such as same-sex couples who adopted, and families where only one parent is biologically related.	
When a child is removed from home due to abuse or neglect, a judge may appoint a CASA volunteer.	**When a family is in crisis and becomes involved in the child welfare system, a CASA volunteer may be appointed by a judge to advocate for the child.** ***OR*** **When a child enters the child welfare system due to allegations of abuse or neglect, a CASA volunteer may be appointed by a judge to advocate for the child and family.**
RATIONALE: By reframing our messaging around a family in need of support instead of highlighting negative words, like abuse and neglect, we can reach volunteers and community partners that want to help families and end child abuse and neglect by building stronger families.	
My child (spoken by volunteer about youth in care)	**The child I advocate for**
RATIONALE: Specifying the CASA volunteer's role provides clarity and sets boundaries, both for the volunteer and for other stakeholders. We do not want to sound like the volunteer is claiming the child.	

OUTDATED WORDING & NEW/CURRENT LANGUAGE

Person-First Language

Person-first language is a way to emphasize the person and view the disorder, condition or disability as only one part of the whole person. CASA programs can demonstrate our commitment to supporting the children, parents and families we serve by using person-first language as much as possible. Please note, some communities prefer identity-first language because they consider some characteristics as inseparable parts of who they are (i.e. the Deaf and autistic communities). If preference of language is unknown or cannot be determined, use person-first. Also, when using terms such as vulnerable and high-risk as adjectives make sure to use person-first language.

OUTDATED	NEW/CURRENT
Foster child or youth	**A child or youth in foster care**
PMC child or youth	**A child or youth in long-term foster care**
High-risk youth/At-risk youth	**Youth at an increased risk of [outcome]**
Addict; alcoholic; drug user	**Person with a substance use disorder**
Abused and neglected children	**Children who have experienced abuse or neglect**
Former foster youth; foster care alumni	**Person who experienced foster care**
Disabled child or youth	**Child or youth with a disability**
Aging out youth	**Youth exiting foster care at age 18**

Destigmatizing Language

Destigmatizing language is a way to to remove associations of shame or disgrace from certain words. See below for recommendations on how to avoid the following stigmatizing language. While not all examples are outlined below, a broad recommendation is to reference the actual causal factors specific to the experiences of the child or youth.

OUTDATED	NEW/CURRENT
Delinquent youth	**Youth involved in the Justice System**
Domestic violence	**Intimate partner violence**
Homeless people; the homeless	**People experiencing homelessness; people without housing**
Poverty-stricken; the poor; poor people	**People with lower incomes; people experiencing poverty**
Committed suicide; successful, unsuccessful and failed suicide attempt	**Died by suicide; attempted suicide; survived a suicide attempt**

Advocacy for All Language

To help have a consistent message across the network, below is a list of commonly used phrases and words to describe the different backgrounds and experiences of the children, parents and families we serve. By using these approved language suggestions we will be aligning our communications and strengthening our advocacy for all. This language helps ensure fair and thoughtful decision-making, focusing on the strengths and needs of each individual situation.

- Addressing the needs of all
- Belonging
- Community traditions and/or norms
- Different backgrounds and/or experiences
- Expression of self
- Family traditions, history, practices, norms and/or backgrounds
- Heritage
- Individual experiences
- Mindfulness
- People from all walks of life
- Respectful
- Sexual orientation
- Specific experiences of the child, parent or family
- Understanding unique backgrounds and/or experiences
- Overall wellness
- Welcoming

NOTE: For the use of recruitment and hiring practices, refer to characteristics and experiences protected under federal civil rights laws. Language could include "without discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age and disability per federal civil rights laws."

PUTTING IT INTO ACTION

STORIES

Stories are an important part of CASA messaging, and should reflect the same wording and considerations. Try to include stories featuring all children and families from a variety of backgrounds, histories and experiences. Showcase reunification, adoption by family and other outcomes we strive for.

Reunification

Two children, aged 18 months and newborn, were removed from home due to their parents' struggle with substance use. At the first family meeting, mom and dad were very distraught and said they had no one who would come to the meetings. They said their relationships with their siblings were broken and the grandparents were angry with the situation so they wouldn't come either. The CASA volunteer and the caseworker did the Connectedness Map with them and both parents identified other siblings and other family members that may come. By the fourth meeting, several siblings, a grandmother and the foster mother were all in attendance to support the parents. Additionally, the parents had completed all services, attended AA and had been clean for over 6 months. They never missed any visits with the children because siblings helped provide rides, family members helped to make improvements to the home and provided the boys with beds and clothing. The team agreed to start transitioning the children home!

Thomas, aged 11 months, was removed from his mother due to her victimization in an intimate partner violence case, and placed in a foster home two hours away from his family. Because of the distance, his mother was only able to visit once every two weeks. The CASA volunteer advocated for him to be placed with his maternal grandparents where he could be with family and his mother could visit more regularly. Being around family also helped his mother feel supported enough to leave the abusive relationship, and Thomas was reunited with her.

Jennie, 3, and Ryan, 2, were removed from home due to suspected neglect as they were not gaining weight or growing on a consistent basis. The children's CASA volunteer went through their medical records and found that a pediatrician had diagnosed both children with a condition that caused slow growth and developmental delays. The volunteer helped the children's mother find physical, speech and occupational therapists. The children were reunited with their mother and are happy and growing.

STORIES

Building Connections

The CASA program and CPS collaborated to reunite Benny with his extended family. A CASA volunteer located his family using Collaborative Family Engagement (CFE) tools and found that his Aunt Marsha was overwhelmed to hear he was lingering in foster care. She's now motivated to adopt him. Benny now has a renewed hope for his future and said, "This is the best day of my life."

After spending 10 years with her adoptive family, 11-year-old Leah reentered foster care after a breakdown in the adoption. Wanting to reconnect Leah with her family of origin, her CASA volunteer and caseworker had a Seneca Search done on Leah's grandmother, after learning about this tool in a Collaborative Family Engagement (CFE) training. Potential family members were contacted on Facebook and the team found numerous family members who wanted to be involved in Leah's life, even an aunt who is seeking to adopt Leah. When Leah first entered foster care as a baby, Leah's aunt was 19 years old and unable to care for her. 10 years later, this aunt is financially stable, connected to her family and excited about the possibility of reuniting with Leah.

The CASA Difference

In and out of foster care since she was very young, Ash struggled with self-confidence. She was shy and barely spoke at all, except with her older brother and their CASA volunteer, Ron. Sometimes, the CASA program took kids and their volunteers on field trips to give them the chance to socialize. Ron knew these outings would be good for Ash, so he worked hard to make her feel safe. The first couple of trips were difficult. After a while, Ron and others at the CASA program started to notice Ash's confidence building. With time, patience and practice, Ash started to feel more comfortable speaking up, socializing and expressing herself.

Marlo was assigned to advocate for Lucas, a 10-year-old boy receiving disability services. Lucas struggled with behavior issues, but just like any other child, he wanted a family. His favorite things in the world were Harry Potter and hugs. After an adoptive placement fell through, Marlo and other members of Lucas's education team met to come up with a plan for him having to change schools. They worked long and hard to create goals and support measures to help ease the transition and ensure Lucas could succeed. But soon after at his new school, Lucas got suspended for behavior. When Marlo called the school for more information, it became clear that they didn't understand the CASA volunteer's role. After weeks of back-and-forth, persistence and clarification, Marlo was finally allowed to join Lucas's meeting…Only to find out they never received the notes on goals and supports that Marlo and the team had worked so hard on before Lucas moved. Marlo provided the school with the correct paperwork, and the team was able to write a behavior intervention plan and goals that would set Lucas up for success, not failure. She now works with her CASA program as an education specialist, helping other CASA volunteers be the best advocates they can be for kids like Lucas.

TESTIMONIALS

Testimonials are a clean, concise way to tell the CASA story. When collecting quotes from volunteers, donors and stakeholders, make sure to adjust quotes as needed to follow messaging guidelines. Key things to look out for are not using the phrase "my child," but instead, "the child I advocate for." Reinforce that these children have families, and it is our role to advocate for and support them.

From CASA Volunteers

"At the close of my first case, the child I advocated for was off her antidepressants, passing all her classes, and had a permanent home with a loving aunt. But my favorite moment was a few months later when she called to tell me about her new job at Wendy's. She was so proud — but not as proud as me!"

"My favorite moment was watching the child I advocated for be told she was going home to her loving mother after years of being apart. After a long journey, a true story of forgiveness and unconditional love in the heart of a child that most adults are not willing or capable of."

"The child I advocate for was waiting at the door to see me, and as I entered the room they hugged me hard and said they were so glad to see me — they are 16!"

"Favorite moments? Being there for the children you advocate for, then one year later running into them after a closed case. They tell their friends how you were there for them. Seeing the difference you made manifest."

From Judges & Community Partners

"It is the CASA network's dedication to providing a voice to the vulnerable children that inspires so many, including myself, to make a difference in the lives of children who have been abused or neglected." – The Honorable John Specia, Jr., former judge and DFPS Commissioner

"I'm looking for CASA volunteers to bring courageous and common-sense recommendations." – local judge

POSITIVE WORDS LISTS

Whenever there is a chance to speak on your CASA program off-the-cuff, add to the core message with positive words that convey the value that CASA volunteers bring to a child's case.

Accountable
Advocacy/Advocate for children
Best interest of the child
Breaking the cycle
Bright future
Carefully screened volunteers
Collaborative
Community-based
Compassion
Consistent
Court-appointed
Create connections
Dedicated
Empowers
Everyday people
Family-focused
Healing
Highly trained and supported volunteers
Holistic
Hope
Influential
Investment in future
Life-changing
Making a difference
Make informed recommendations
Objective
One child at a time
Positive future
Premier volunteer opportunity
Quality
Respectful
Safe/Safety
Solution-oriented
Stability
Strength-based
Strengthen families
Support system
Team player
Thrive
Trusted partner
Well-being
Welcoming

CONCLUSION

As a part of the CASA network, we are offering and equipping you with this Messaging Book because it's critical that we are all communicating the same messages. Most importantly, it's crucial that we share our message in a comprehensive way that appeals to a wide audience and shows that CASA programs truly are of, and for, the community.

With this book as a guide, programs are encouraged to review all of their printed and digital materials like rack cards, websites and social media accounts and decide what can be:

- Changed within one month,
- Changed within six months, and
- Changed within the year.

Print Materials

- Annual report
- Rack cards
- Fliers
- Business cards

Digital Assets

- Website
- Social media accounts
- Auto signatures
- Digital ads
- E-newsletters

This shift in our messaging is part of a larger shift within the CASA network and child welfare system as we put more emphasis on family reunification and connections. We recognize that these changes won't happen overnight. Texas CASA will continue to provide support and resources for programs using this messaging. Together, we can create a consistent CASA message that showcases the unique and essential contributions, impact and best interest advocacy of CASA in Texas.