

Championing Every Child

Every child in California's foster care system deserves the support of a caring adult to speak up for them in court, in school, and in the community—a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA). These dedicated volunteers, carefully trained and supervised by 44 local, nonprofit, professional CASA programs located throughout California, become the voices for these vulnerable children and serve important mentoring roles as well. Their work is informed by a platform of compassion, justice, and equity, while they help children find a safe and stable home and a more hopeful future.

Today, there are 12,000 children in foster care who benefit from having their own CASA volunteer, an individual who has been trained and assigned to them by the local CASA program in their county. These "ordinary" men and women do extraordinary work, volunteering their time to a child who needs them. But California has the largest foster care population in the nation, and there are nearly 50,000 children throughout the state who still need the dedicated one-on-one support that only a CASA volunteer can provide. There is urgency to do more to serve these children.

In partnership with 44 local CASA programs statewide, California CASA is determined over the next decade to recruit more volunteers and serve more children more quickly and effectively. The ultimate goal? To achieve our ambitious vision that every child in California's foster care system will have a CASA by their side if they need one. The California CASA Strategic Plan, approved by the Board of Directors in October 2023, is our road map to reaching that goal.

The Power of CASA

Over more than 40 years, research has shown that the CASA volunteer model works. Children and youth in foster care and the juvenile justice systems who are supported by a CASA are more likely to receive the services they need, have more self-confidence, do better in school, have improved health outcomes, and more quickly find permanency and a forever home. CASAs help provide essential resources, mentorship, and a support system that gives these children hope for a better future.

Founded in 1987 as a private, nonprofit organization, California CASA serves the state's 44 diverse local CASA programs. Our network covers 52 of the 58 counties, where 99% of the state's children in foster care live. California CASA's work is powered by a public-private partnership between individual and foundation donations and major appropriations and grants from the State of California. With this support, we provide our services free of charge to all local CASA programs.

Sharon M. Lawrence, Esq., has been CEO since 2017. The organization is overseen by a statewide Board of Directors representing a variety of backgrounds and first-hand experience with the CASA model. Through training, legislative advocacy, marketing, fundraising, and expert counsel and advice, our professional staff of 19 delivers robust, impactful programming and service to the local programs, thus helping children who face unthinkable abuse and neglect. In every county, CASAs show a child that they matter, that people care about them, and that they are deserving of a brighter future.



FY2024-FY2026

California CASA Strategic Plan



A Path Forward

In early 2023, California CASA embarked on a comprehensive process to create a new three-year Strategic Plan with our consultants at EQ/Equilibrium Collaborative.

Through dozens of interviews with local CASA program Executive Directors/CEOs and internal and external individuals knowledgeable about CASA and our organization, it became clear that California CASA is healthy and on the right track.

California CASA's greatest strengths are:

- Achievement of a \$60 million three-year California State appropriation (under the State Budget Act of 2022, signed into law by Governor Newsom on 6/30/2022) and distribution of grant funds to the network through a new grantmaking process led by California CASA, as well as the development of position papers, active legislative advocacy, and building legislative relationships.
- Responsiveness to local CASA programs and their access to California CASA expertise and support.
- Playing an important facilitation and convening role for local programs.
- Offering shared services and administrative efficiencies that help local programs improve operations and allow them to focus more on direct CASA services.

California CASA's greatest areas for growth are:

- Marketing and raising more awareness statewide of the CASA model and brand, especially for recruitment and retention of volunteers.
- Moving into a more proactive and prominent legislative advocacy role.
- Continuing to identify sustainable funding from the private and public sectors and supporting local programs that want help to achieve their own balanced and diversified funding.
- Expanding CASA services statewide for youth in the juvenile justice system.
- Further diversifying staff and Board at California CASA to ensure a better reflection of the racial and other identities of the children and youth served; and helping the network do the same.
- Putting more focus on internal organizational development as California CASA grows.

The new California CASA Strategic Plan was enthusiastically and unanimously endorsed by the Board of Directors in October 2023.

Three Key Priorities: FY2024-FY2026

California CASA has established these priorities to pursue in the FY2024-FY2026 Strategic Plan, pending sufficient funding:

- 1. Continue to support and expand the core CASA model.** Only 17% of children in California currently have the support of a CASA volunteer, but our vision is to ensure that every child who needs a CASA will have one. This remains a critical focus as long as there are children in foster care who need this advocacy.
- 2. Expand our scope of advocacy to recruit, train, and supervise CASAs to serve youth in the juvenile justice system.** Based on the positive results of a multi-year research study of the impact of CASAs on youth in the juvenile justice system, this is a major policy shift: to broaden the California CASA Mission and Vision beyond the core model of serving children and youth in foster care to also encompass youth in the juvenile justice court system.
- 3. Advocate for systemic change within the child welfare system.** Expand California CASA's presence in Sacramento and harness the invaluable information CASA volunteers, local programs, and CASA youth have to advocate for systemic change related to racism and disproportionality, the Family First Prevention Services Act, and for more funding to support youth in foster care.

As a result of the Strategic Planning process and the articulated priorities, the Board voted in October 2023 to amend the California CASA Vision and Mission statements.

Vision:

Every child in the California child welfare and juvenile justice systems who needs advocacy will have the transformative support of a CASA volunteer.

Mission:

Ensure that children and youth in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems have both a voice and the services they need to thrive. We achieve this by strengthening and empowering California's network of local CASA programs and advocating for effective child welfare policies and practices.

The Strategic Plan Framework: FY2024-FY2026

The framework was built around four Areas of Strategic Focus ("Pillars"), with detailed Goals, Objectives, and KPIs for each. In summary:

Pillar One: Strengthening and Empowering the Network

- 1. Goal:** Support local CASA programs to recruit and train the requisite number of diverse candidates to ensure a pool of volunteers are available to serve more children and youth.
- 2. Goal:** Local programs are made more efficient through economies of scale, with California CASA serving as a coordinating body for the network.
- 3. Goal:** Support the creation and expansion of programs statewide to provide CASAs for youth in the juvenile justice system.

Pillar Two: Advocacy and Public Policy

- 1. Goal:** Expand capacity for statewide advocacy of effective child welfare policies and practices; initiate more proactive policy changes in Sacramento using information, data, experience, and the personal interactions with legislators of CASAs, staff, and youth formerly in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.
- 2. Goal:** Elevate California CASA and local CASA programs' visibility statewide with marketing and increased press coverage; maintain positive awareness among key audiences.

Pillar Three: Revenue Growth

- 1. Goal:** California CASA is a financially stable organization with a well-balanced mix of private and public revenue sources to sustain and expand our programs and services.
- 2. Goal:** California CASA provides local CASA programs with sophisticated fundraising counsel and resources that strengthen their capacity and increase overall philanthropy across the network.

Pillar Four: Operational Excellence

- 1. Goal:** Ensure that California CASA is a great employer over the short- and long-term.
- 2. Goal:** Promote and practice Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion through our policies, recruiting, decisions, and communications by engaging in culturally receptive, fair, and inclusive behaviors and actions.
- 3. Goal:** Succession planning to ensure a sustainable, well-run organization into the future.

