



The National Court Appointed Special Advocate Association

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Lyn Hogan
Senior Policy Analyst
217R Old Executive Office Building
The White House
Washington, DC 20502

June 21, 1996

Dear Ms. Hogan:

I enjoyed talking with you yesterday. Your project will be very interesting--and certainly timely. Our ambition has always been to have a volunteer to represent every child who needs one by the year 2000. Even with 38,000 volunteers, we're only about a quarter of the way toward that goal. More work has got to be done to make this system work better for kids, and to prevent more kids from flowing into the system in the first place.

CASA is unusual in the child protection field. We are a private/public partnership, working closely with the Justice Department, with state and local courts, and with our own community-based members.

CASA is also not a light volunteer program; our volunteers are accepted virtually as equals with the professionals in the system. Their job is not to act as surrogate parents, but to tenaciously push the system to get each child into a safe, permanent home. While they cooperate with agency staff, CASA volunteers owe no allegiance to government agencies or the professions which staff them. It is a crucial part of the volunteer role that they have the independence necessary to insist that every child find the safe, permanent home she deserves.

Enclosed is some additional information about CASA. If you would like copies of any of the evaluation materials mentioned in the summary, please let us know.

I'll look forward to hearing how your work progresses. Give me a call if we can be helpful in any way. And thanks for your interest.

Sincerely,

Michael S. Piraino,
Chief Executive Officer

**A National
CASA
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REPORT OF THE 1995 NATIONAL CASA ASSOCIATION PROGRAM SURVEY

NATIONAL COURT APPOINTED
SPECIAL ADVOCATE ASSOCIATION

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A child's voice in court.®

1995 PROGRAM SURVEY REPORT

The National Court Appointed Special Advocate Association

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INTRODUCTION

The CASA/GAL network has been growing steadily since the first program started in 1976. There are now 610 programs in 50 states and the Virgin Islands. In 1995, over 38,000 CASA/GAL volunteers served more than 129,000 abused and neglected children, and provided 4,180,000 hours of advocacy. In this era of budgetary cutbacks and increasing strains on resources and services for children, the contributions of CASA/GAL volunteers are clearly vital.

Every year, NCASAA seeks to update our information on CASA/GAL programs across the country. This is used by National CASA in assessing program trends and needs, in preparing for presentations on Capitol Hill and to other child advocacy organizations, and in planning training opportunities. Many local and state programs use the national survey information to both determine the kinds of information they want to collect and maintain, and to look at how they relate to national trends and averages.

A number of survey questions are repeated each year, such as information on budget, staff, number of volunteers, children served, volunteer hours contributed, etc. This allows us to compare and track growth and development. As we look at results, we better understand the commonalties and differences among CASA/GAL programs. Programs which follow NCASAA recommendations for data collection will have ready access to this essential information. For more on data collection recommendations, see the section on Management Practices in the NCASAA Member Services Handbook.

Each annual survey also collects information on selected areas of concern. Special emphasis is placed on questions commonly asked by potential funders, legislators and the media. In last year's survey, for instance, gathered information on computer equipment and usage in CASA programs, as we began development of "CASANET" -- a World Wide Web internet site for CASA programs and volunteers, allowing computer on-line access to National CASA services, resources and communications. This year's survey looked at more detail on case assignment and legal representation.

The 1995 survey was sent to the 580 CASA/GAL programs that were operational and assigning volunteers during the previous calendar year (1994). Information was received from 460 programs, a 79% return rate. This excellent response enables us to draw an accurate representational picture of the CASA network as a whole. Our thanks to all of the busy program staff who took the time to fill out and return this year's survey, and hope it will prove both informative and useful. We would be glad to share any specifics on the information gathered in this survey. If you have any questions or need additional survey details, contact Sue Shecket, Grant Program Administrator.

❖ INTERPRETING THE NUMBERS: OBSERVATIONS AND COMMENTS

Since its inception, CASA had been spreading and growing very rapidly at a rate of almost 10% per year in the number of programs, volunteers and children served. In 1995, that reported rate of increase has slowed, to a 5% increase in programs, 3% in volunteers and less than 1% in children served. There are a number of contributing factors to consider when reviewing these overall statistics.

CASA programs report that funding is the most critical factor affecting their ability to plan for and implement any expansion in the number of volunteers and children served. In order to maintain high quality program management and volunteer supervision, a ratio of 30 volunteers to one supervising staff person is recommended by National CASA. Program growth, therefore, is contingent on the ability of programs to increase their budgets significantly to hire more professional staff to provide support and training for additional volunteers. In these times of intense competition for shrinking private and public funding, CASA programs report that just maintaining current levels of funding has become a priority and a challenge. Stability, rather than expansion, should be considered a measure of success.

The survey results also demonstrate that funding for a CASA program is a very good investment. When new and additional resources are secured, the results can be quite impressive. As an example, the twenty eight programs that received National CASA start up or expansion grants in 1993 achieved an overall increase of 66% in the number of volunteers and 70% in the number of children served over the two year grant period (July, 1993 - June, 1995). When comparing programs that responded to both the 1995 and 1994 surveys, these grantees also showed a greater increase over non-grantees in their total budget, funding from private sources, number of staff, and number of children served.

The size of a program, based on the number of volunteers, also appears to play a role in the ability of programs to sustain or grow over the past two years. The smaller programs are clearly struggling. On average, the programs with less than 26 volunteers that responded to both the 1995 and 1994 surveys experienced a significant reduction in budget, number of volunteers and children served. Programs with 26 to 50 volunteers, while managing to maintain their funding levels and number of volunteers, also served fewer children. The larger programs with 76+ volunteers however, did show gains in budget, volunteers and children served. These variables contributed to the smaller overall increase in the total number of children served nationally.

CASA programs are rapidly improving their data collection practices. Computers have become an integral part of everyday life for CASA volunteers and staff, allowing better tracking and management of cases and statistics. Ironically, this too has contributed to the difference in this year's national statistics, as program directors report that previous "guesstimates" have been replaced with accurate, more specific reports on volunteers and children.

Medians vs Means:

A frequently asked question is "What does the average CASA program look like?". In order to create such a profile, we have to consider how to draw the most realistic representation. There is tremendous variation in size and scope of CASA programs both across the country and within states. For example, the smallest program responding to this survey has 2 volunteers, while the largest has 1197! Reporting just a simple numerical average (i.e. mean) would often obscure this diversity. The mean, of course, is computed by simply adding together all the answers to each question and dividing by the number of respondents. In contrast, the median is the midpoint in the range of answers — the number which, if all responses were listed in ascending order, would be exactly in the middle of the list. Fifty percent of responses would be smaller, and 50% larger. The median can be a more useful statistic than the mean, because the mean is easily distorted by extremes at either end. When there are not extreme values in a set of data, the mean and median can be very close, or even identical. Accordingly, rather than the mean (average), this reports presents the **median** response to the survey questions.

What Do We Look Like?

CASA programs are now operating in 610 communities nationwide. Over the past few years, new program development has taken place primarily in more rural and suburban areas, as most major cities have a CASA/GAL program. Consequently, 45% of programs are now located in areas with a population of under 100,000, and tend to be proportionately smaller programs. Based on the median for each factor, the "typical" CASA program in 1995 had an annual operating budget of \$50,147 from a mix of public and private sources. The program had 2 staff (one part time and one full time), 33 active volunteers, and served 122 children during the year. Each volunteer received 25 hours of training prior to assignment, and 10 hours of additional in service, and contributed 110 hours annually.

CASA and Computers:

National CASA strongly encourages all programs to invest in the best possible computers, and in the staff training needed to take full advantage of these important tools. The benefits are best summed up in the words of a CASA staff person from Texas, who reports, "As a direct result of finally getting a really good computer in our office, we have been able to increase the number of volunteers and provide better service to the children. It has allowed me to be much more efficient. I now have more time to work with volunteers and get out into our community." Another important consideration is the increasing necessity to provide funders and administrators with the informational materials and timely programmatic and financial reports they need to

justify continued funding and support of our work. Programs must also maintain a credible and professional image in the courts and in the community to enhance and underscore the valuable contribution of our volunteers. This requires adequate and up to date computer and office equipment. These tools are no longer a luxury for CASA, but are increasingly the backbone of a well organized and effective program.

As more information and communication become available through the Internet, programs are also encouraged to get a fast modem for their computer to allow access to such resources as CASAnet, National CASA's on-line communication and information service, which will be implemented as a World Wide Web site in 1996. To participate, programs and volunteers will need a computer with a modem, and be able to access the internet, either through a local provider or any commercial online service such as America Online, Microsoft Network or CompuServe. No special software is required.

Implications of Growth:

There are currently approximately 450,000 children in the court system due to abuse and neglect. CASA volunteers served 129,000 children in 1995. Increases in the total number of children served, therefore, is related to the ability to increase the number of volunteers nationwide. This has far reaching implications for CASA programs. In order to make gains in the proportion of abused and neglected children in the court system who have a CASA volunteer, the capacity of CASA programs to recruit, screen, train and supervise volunteers will need to continually expand. Clearly, growth requires greater financial resources for additional staff, desks, phones, office space, equipment, etc. It also has a major impact on organizational structure, and on the roles and relationships of staff, Board and volunteers. This is a major programmatic, administrative and organization challenge, which needs to be addressed both at the local, state and national level. CASA programs need and want to accomplish growth and expansion without compromising program quality. Attention to long range planning, resource development and effective program management are critical if the CASA movement is to remain effective and dynamic.

National CASA is committed to providing leadership, assistance and support to the CASA network as we look at ways to assure that abused and neglected children receive the best possible representation in the court system. The increasing number of requests for information and assistance, more widespread public awareness of CASA, and positive response to our materials and training is exciting and challenging. Your input is crucial to this continuing success is always encouraged and welcome. If you have any questions or comments, contact National CASA.

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FAX: 1-206-323-8137
email: nationalcasa@msn.com

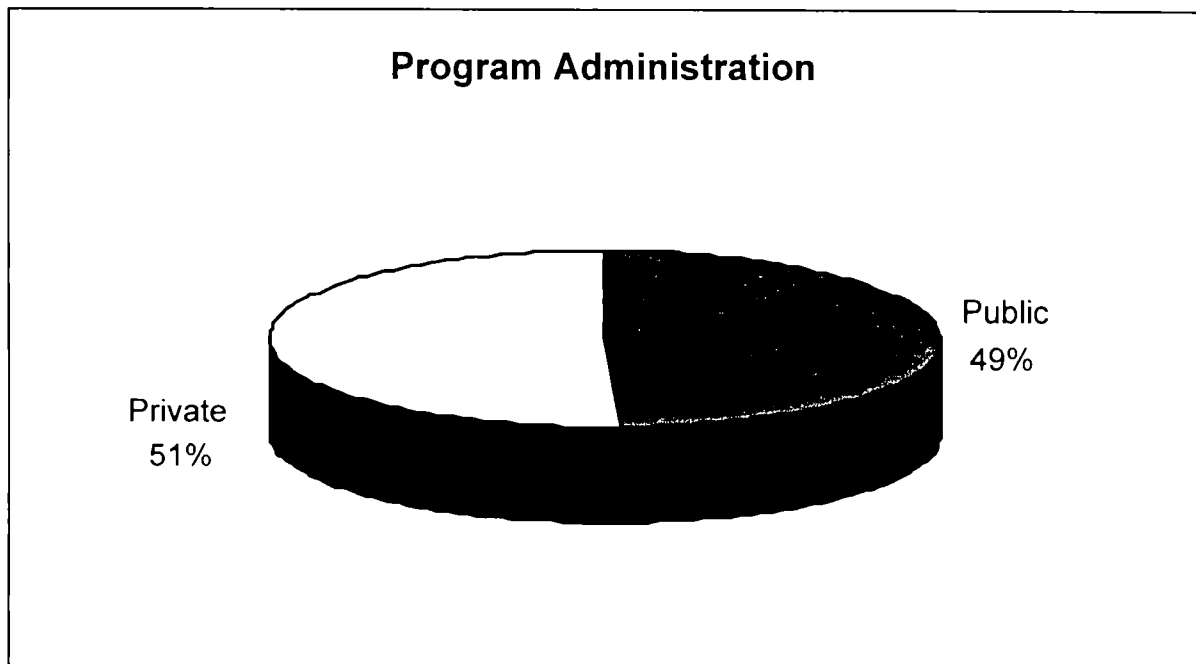
I. PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION

❖ AGE OF PROGRAMS

The **median age** of the programs surveyed is **5 years**, which is one year less than in the previous year. This is reflective of the continuing growth of CASA nationwide, and the constant addition of new programs.

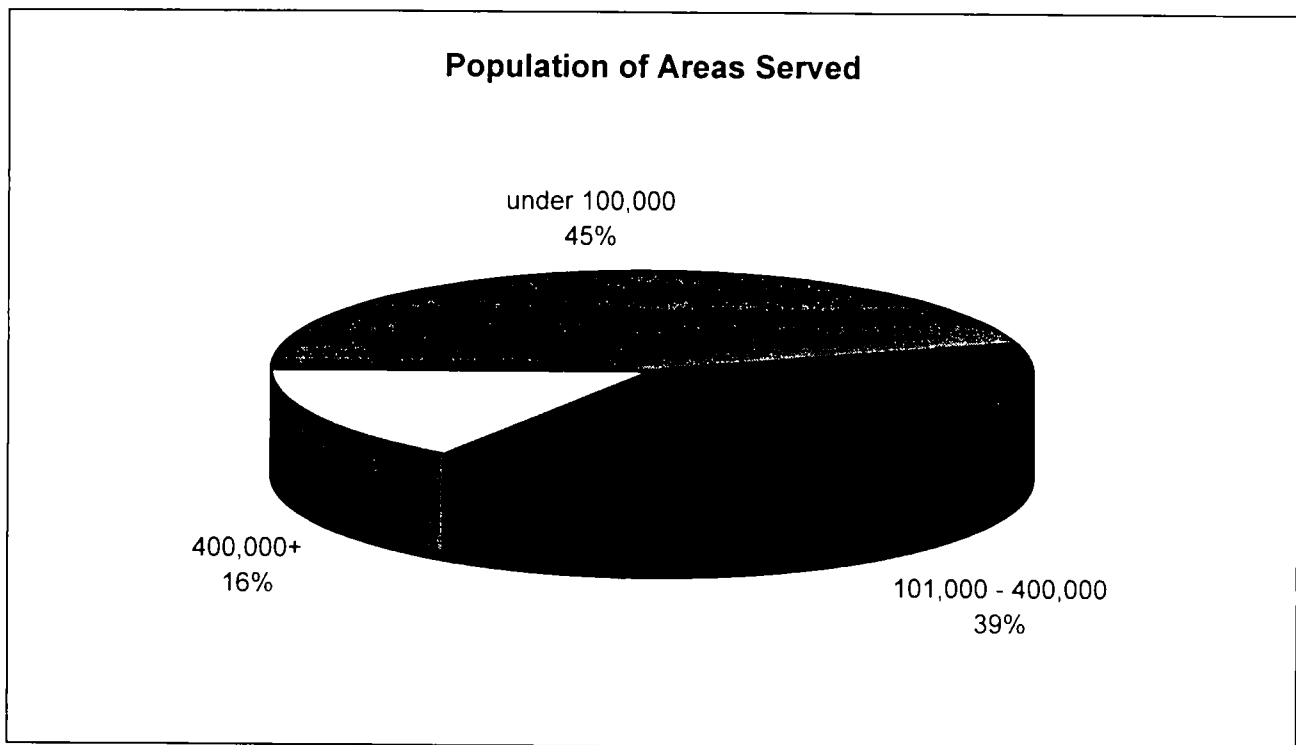
❖ PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION

Most of the new CASA/GAL programs that began operations in 1994 are private non-for-profit organizations. This is reflected in the continuing increase in the percentage of privately administered CASA programs nationwide, which now are the majority (50.9%) of those responding to the survey. The remaining 49.1% are administered either by a state funded program office, the court or by their county.



❖ POPULATION OF AREA SERVED BY PROGRAM

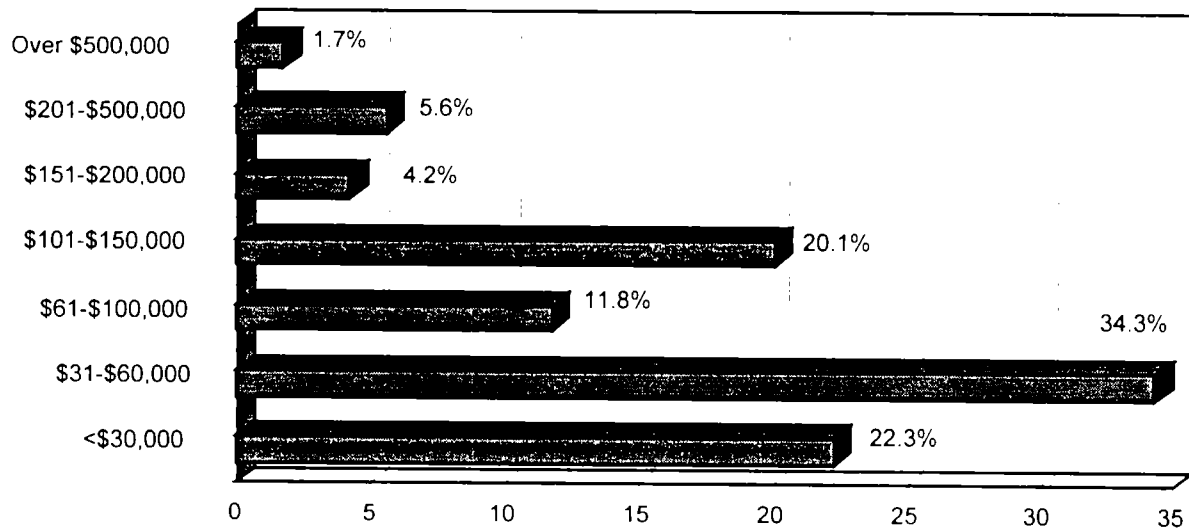
Over the past few years, new program development has taken place primarily in more rural and suburban areas. Consequently, 45.4% of programs are now located in areas with a population of under 100,000, and tend to be smaller programs, both in budget and number of volunteers. They also serve a higher proportion (72%) of the abuse and neglect petitions in their courts, but have an higher average cost per child. Small communities however, often have more limited potential resources for funding and volunteers. Programs with fewer than 26 volunteers tend to have had the most difficulty in sustaining and developing their programs, and have experienced an average decrease in budget, number of volunteers and children served over the past two years. Medium sized communities (101-400,000) are served by 38.8% of the CASA network. Large urban areas (over 400,000) are fewer in number, and 15.9% of CASA programs serve these cities.



❖ PROGRAM BUDGET

The **median budget size** for CASA/GAL programs is \$50,146. This is almost \$8,000 less than last year, and reflects the trend towards the development of smaller, more rural programs. For a large number of programs, a major proportion of operating costs (i.e., personnel, office space, telephone, etc.) are provided through their county or court budget. Many do not include the actual cost of these services as part of their program budget. Consequently, the true cost of operating these programs is much higher than reported. It is important for all programs to calculate the value of donated essential goods and services, and include this as part of the actual cost of program operations. This will allow the program to make a more accurate determination of the cost per volunteer and per child, and is critical in long range planning and fundraising.

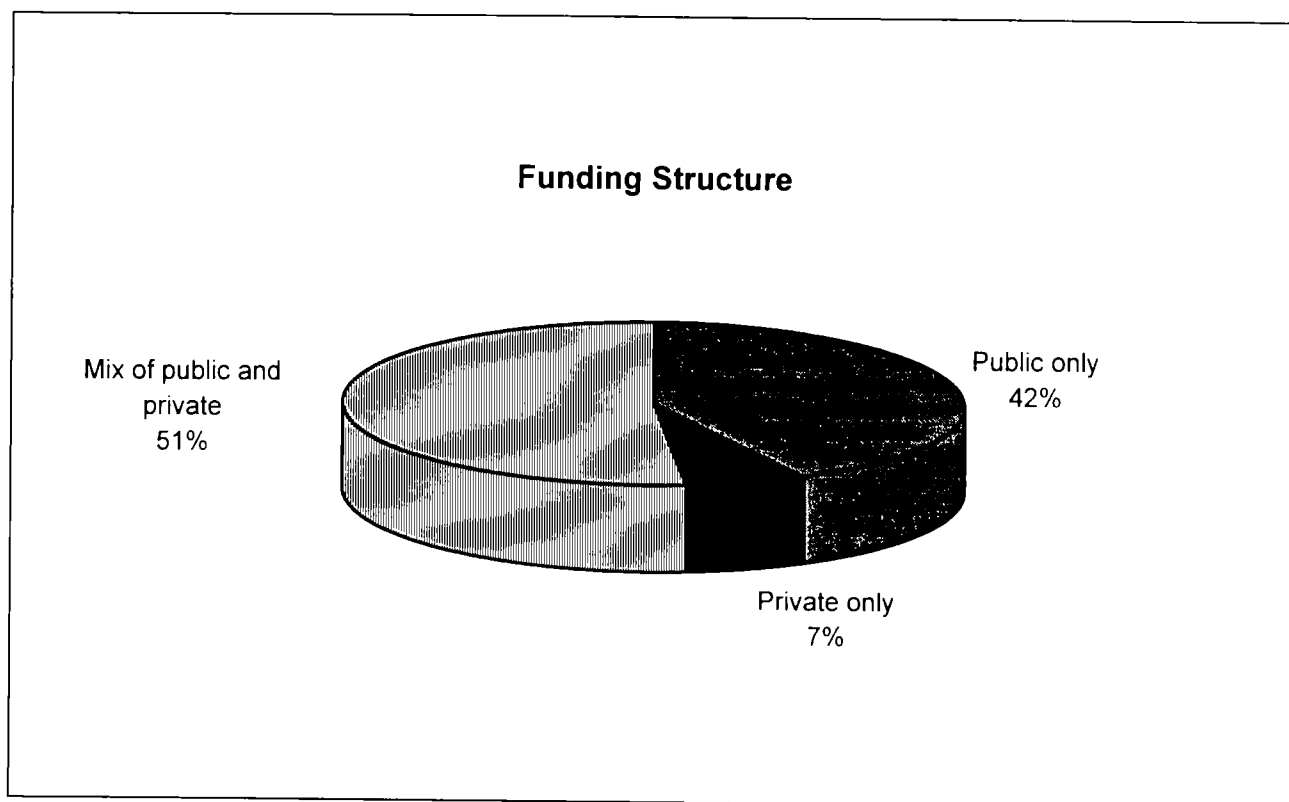
Program Budget



❖ FUNDING TYPE

Funding for CASA/GAL programs is clearly one of the most pressing problems facing the network, with increasing competition for dollars in the human services field.

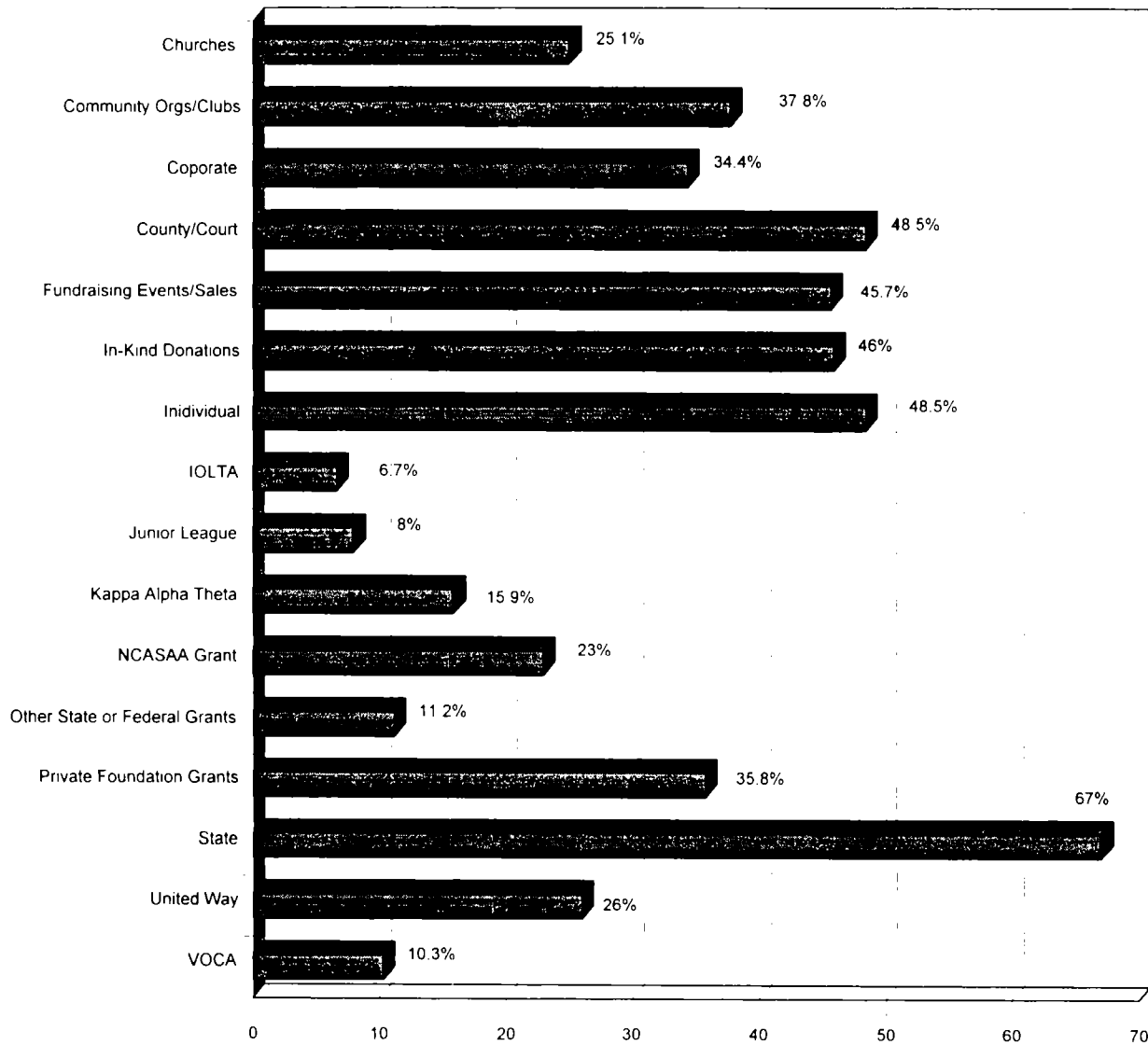
In this survey, 51.6% of the programs responding receive a combination of public and private funds, 41.9% of the programs receive only public funding, and 6.5% have only private funds. This is a shift towards combination funding, as more programs are securing a diversified funding base. These programs receive an average of 56% of their funds from private, and 44% from public sources.



❖ FUNDING SOURCES

CASA programs continue to be very resourceful in developing broad community support. Programs were asked to indicate all sources of funding.

Program Funding Sources



❖ COST OF SERVICE

The current median program **cost per volunteer** is \$1371 per year. The median program **cost per child** is \$477. These figures are a factor of program budget and numbers of volunteers and children. These national median figures, while useful, should be used with caution. Costs are individually affected by other local variables. The highest costs of service in this survey, for example, were incurred by the smallest programs (under 26 volunteers). Several factors may be influencing this finding. These small programs are often new or developing programs that do not yet have many volunteers assigned to cases, but do have a paid staff person and operating costs. In some cases, the community itself is very small and does not warrant a larger program. For these programs, staff to volunteer ratios are often higher, while fixed operating costs such as office space, phones, etc., remain similar to programs with more volunteers. In other situations, some programs have operational costs such as office space donated or provided by the court, and may not include their value in their budget figures. This can result in a lower cost of service.

❖ LEGAL STANDING OF VOLUNTEERS

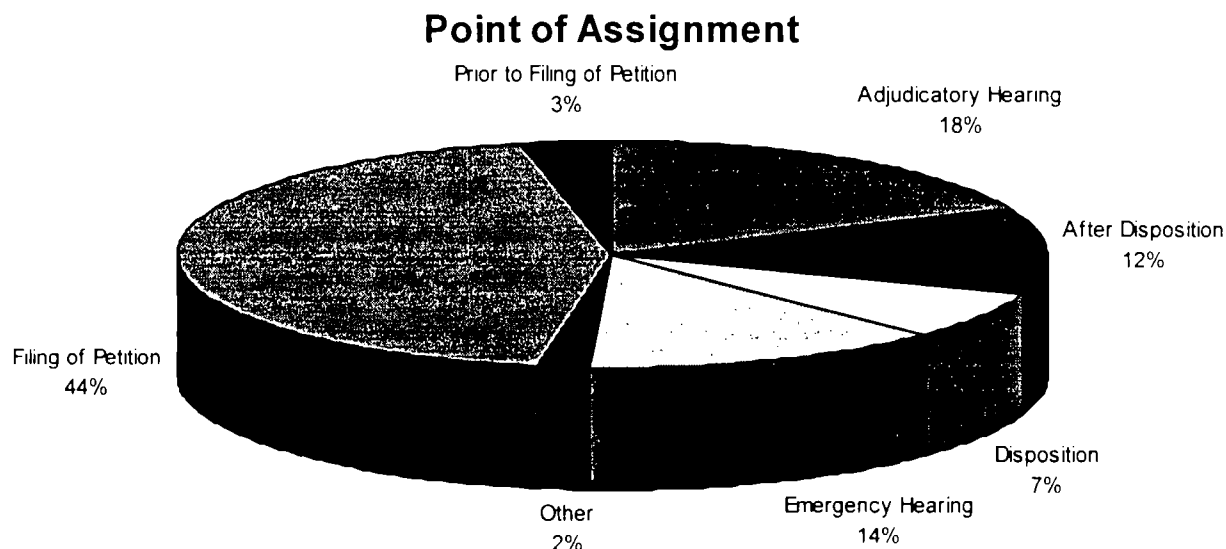
When a volunteer is appointed to a case by the court, in 77.9% of the programs responding, the volunteer is a party to the proceedings. In 22.% of the programs, the volunteer is **not** a party to the proceedings.

❖ TYPES OF CASES

Programs were asked to identify all of the types of cases to which volunteers are assigned. The **primary** mission of CASA is to serve abused and neglected children in dependency proceedings. However, an increasing number of programs have been asked (and in some states required) to assign volunteers to other types of cases when there are allegations or substantiated abuse and neglect.

❖ POINT OF ASSIGNMENT

The recommendation of the Metropolitan Court Judges Committee of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges calls for the appointment of CASA volunteers at the earliest possible point in the proceedings. 47% of programs in this survey assign volunteers at or before the filing of the dependency petition.



❖ LEGAL REPRESENTATION

National CASA standards require that volunteers are provided with legal consultation. Many programs have made secured pro bono legal services, or have made such arrangement with the court. In this survey, programs were asked if and when an attorney is present to provide the volunteer with legal assistance during a court appearance. In 36.5% of the programs responding, an attorney is always present with the volunteer in court. In 40.1% of the programs, an attorney is sometimes present, either at the request of a volunteer or at the determination of the supervisor. There is never an attorney present in 20.3% of the responding programs. Of this last group, 14.8% indicated that the program policy does not require it, and 6.2% do not have the funds to pay for an attorney and have not been able to secure pro bono legal services.

❖ REPRESENTATION OF CHILDREN

In determining the "coverage" of CASA (based on the percentage of abuse/neglect petitions filed in the court that were assigned a CASA volunteer), it is important to consider the tremendous range in the data and the variables that impact the results.

The programs that responded to this survey reported a total of 170,608 petitions filed in their courts in 1994. The smallest figure number reported was 2, and the largest was 27,000! While it was possible for some programs to achieve 100% coverage, it is clearly impossible for others. For example, in this survey, 72 programs reported that volunteers were assigned to 100% of the petitions files in 1994, for a total of 17,631. Almost two thirds (64%) of these programs are located in communities of less than 100,000. At the other end of the range are 11 programs in large urban areas that were able to assign volunteers to 4% or less of the 90,420 petitions filed.

In this survey, the **median** figure is 44% of cases served. This is the midpoint of the range, where half of the programs reporting served less and half served more than 44% of the petitions within their jurisdictions. While this is an impressive figure, and we need to give due credit to the many CASA programs that have succeeded in maintaining high ratios of assignment, it fails to adequately portray the tremendous challenge in those communities where the need is almost overwhelming.

The situation is more sobering when we consider that the national average (mean) figure for this data is 12%. This takes into consideration the huge number of unserved children at the higher end of the range, as well as in many medium sized areas with smaller programs and numbers of volunteers. In the context of the ongoing and expanded need, this 12% coverage, while important and significant, serves as an incentive to continue our efforts to extend the availability of CASA volunteers beyond our current levels.

Although many children did not have a CASA, programs reported that 75% of the children who were not assigned a volunteer were provided with some representation in court.

❖ CHILD FATALITIES

There were sixty six programs that reported a child fatality among the active CASA/GAL cases assigned to their programs in 1994. While this is a high number, a follow up inquiry is being made to clarify the individual circumstances in each case. This includes questions to identify whether the CASA appointment was prior to or after the fatality, whether the CASA recommendation was followed by the court, and whether the fatality was related to the case (illness or accident).

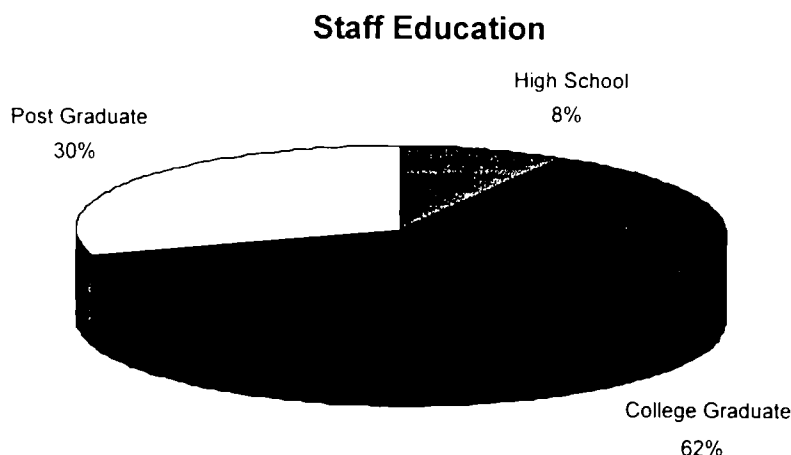
II. PROGRAM OPERATIONS

❖ TRAINING

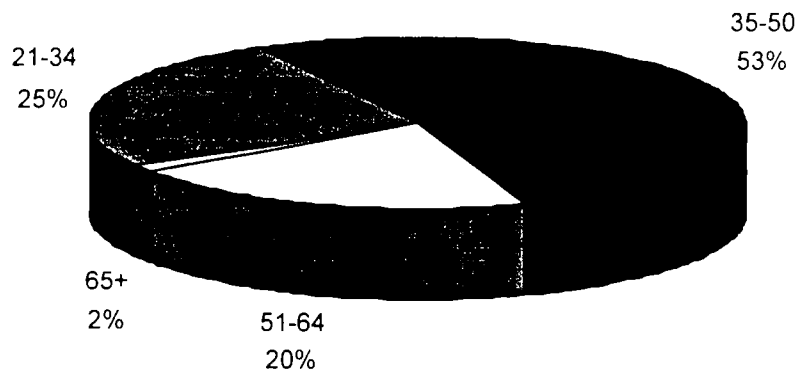
The National Volunteer Training Curriculum (Comprehensive Training for the CASA/GAL) is being used by over 90% of the programs surveyed. The **median number of hours of training** received prior to assignment to a case is 25 hours. Additional training is mandatory in 87% of the programs, with a median of 10 hours of in-service training required annually. It is critical to provide adequate initial and ongoing training to all volunteers, as this is a key element of volunteer retention and satisfaction. Most programs offer training on weekday evenings and weekends, but a small number (6%) hold training on weekdays only. It is important to consider the potential impact of the location and time of volunteer training on volunteer recruitment and retention. Training which is offered during the daytime on weekdays, or at inconvenient or costly locations may discourage or exclude potential volunteers.

❖ DEMOGRAPHICS OF CASA/GAL STAFF

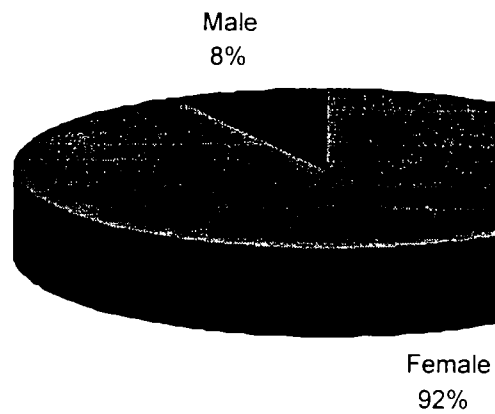
The **median number of staff** in CASA/GAL programs remains unchanged at 2, with over half (52.7%) working part time, and 47.3% working full time. While CASA staff are still predominately female (92.3%), this is a decrease of 2.7% from the previous year. The demographics of ethnicity, age and education have also not changed significantly.



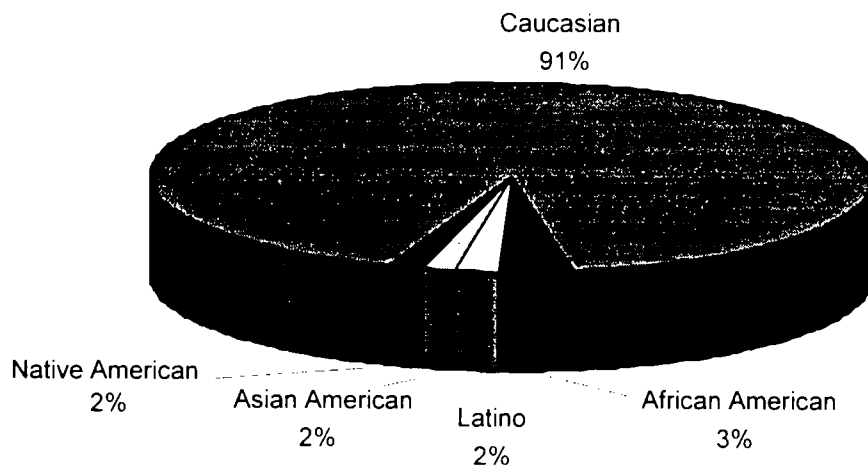
Age of Staff



Gender of Staff



Staff Ethnicity



❖ VOLUNTEER INFORMATION

Number of Volunteers:

The **total number of volunteers** nationwide is now approximately 38,000. The **median number of volunteers** per CASA program is 33, which is a decrease over the previous year. This reflects the addition of a number of new, smaller programs that began assigning cases during this period.

Volunteer Hours

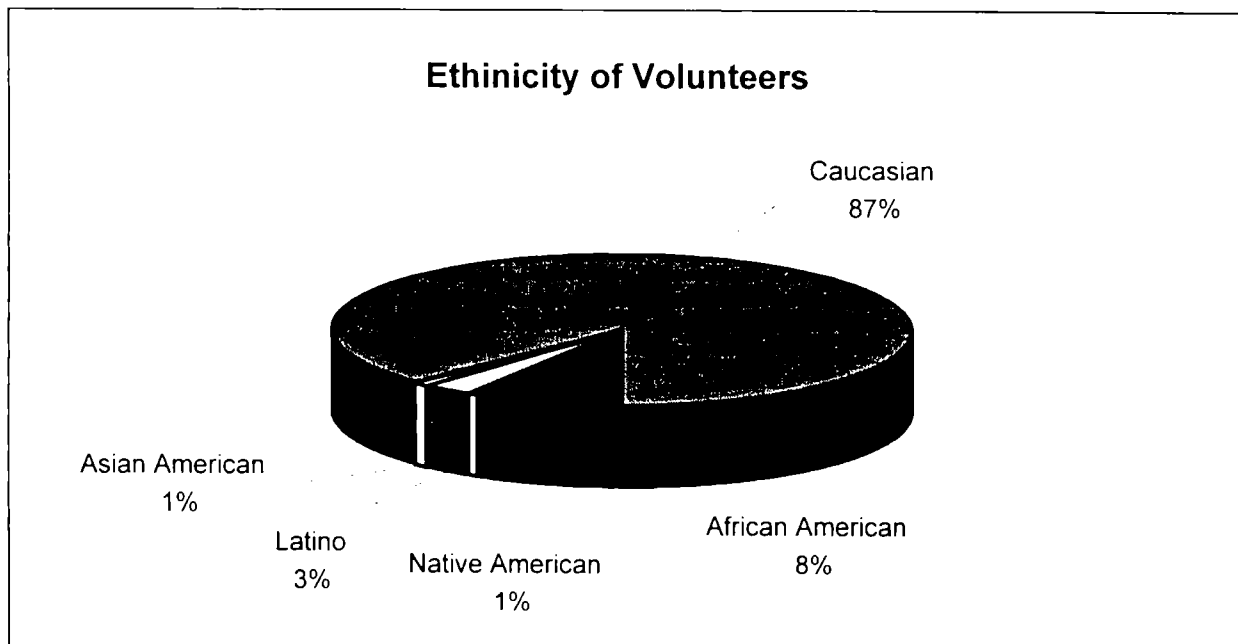
The **median number of hours** contributed per program by volunteers annually is 4018, and the median per volunteer is 110. There is a very large range in this area, clearly influenced by the diverse size and ages of CASA programs, and the level of involvement required of volunteers in cases.

Children Per Volunteer:

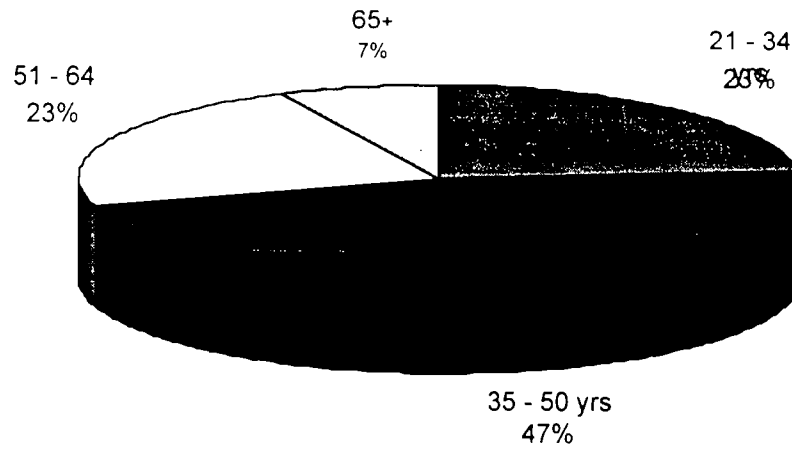
The median number of children served annually per volunteer is 3. National CASA encourages programs to maintain data on the number of children served by volunteers annually as opposed to the number of cases assigned to volunteers. This is a more accurate reflection of the involvement of CASA, and provides a more useful measure of the impact and contribution of the volunteers

❖ DEMOGRAPHICS OF VOLUNTEERS

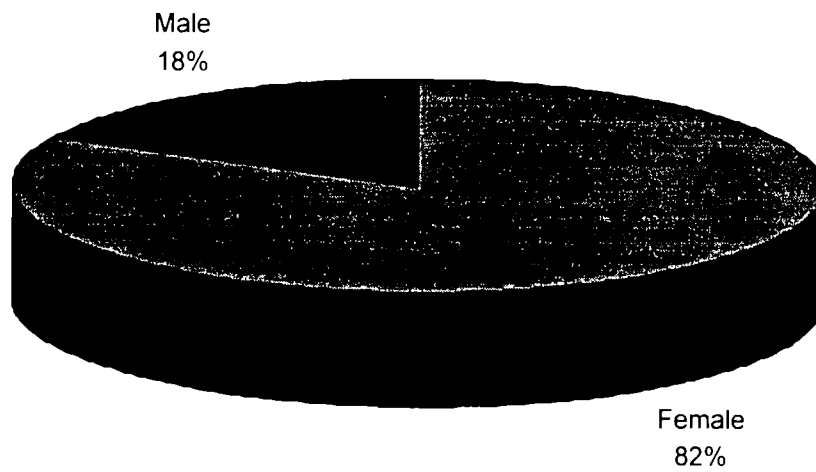
The demographics of volunteers has continued to change. There has been a small shift in ethnicity, with a 2% decrease in Caucasian, and a 1.3% increase in Native American and 1.1% increase in Latino volunteers. There has been no significant change in age or gender.



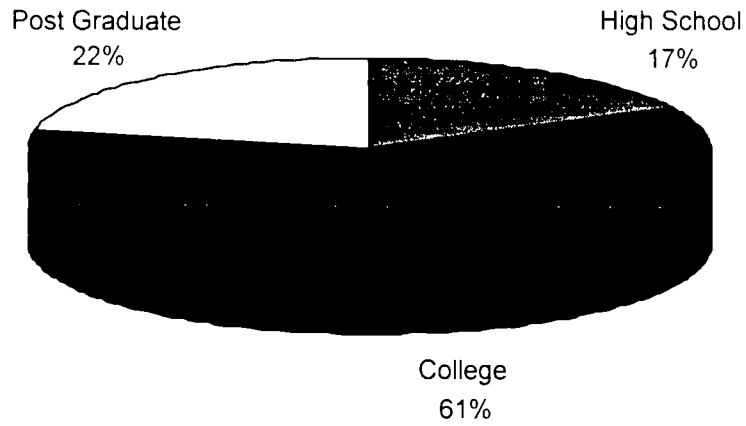
Age of Volunteers



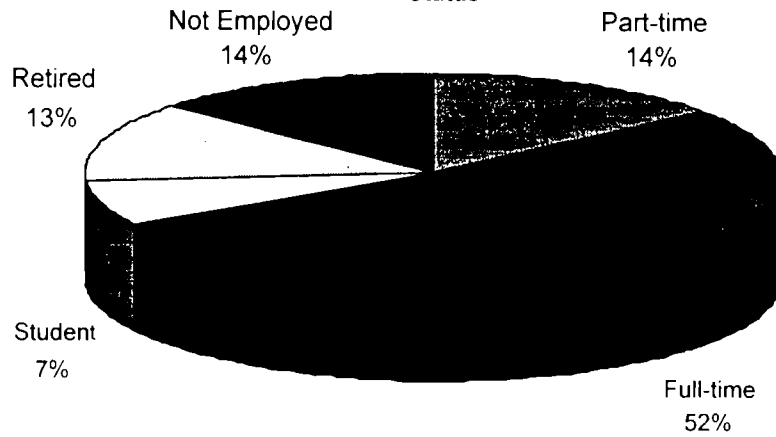
Gender of Volunteers



Volunteer Education Completed



Volunteer Employment Status



❖ INFORMATION ON CHILDREN

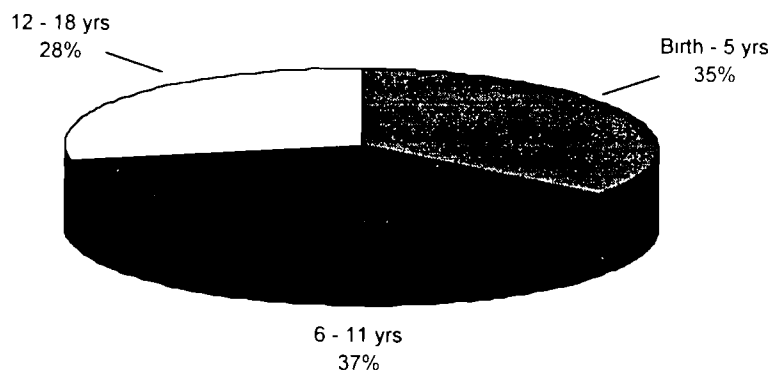
Children Served:

The **median number of children served** annually by responding programs is 122. This is an increase of 15 over the previous year. The median number of **children's cases closed** per year is 34.

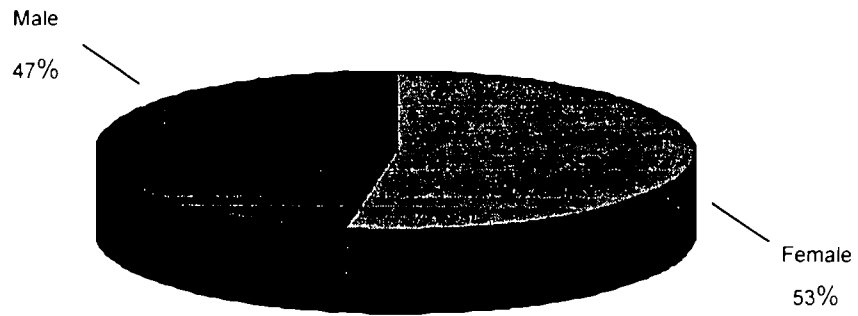
Demographics of Children Served:

The demographics of the children served by CASA volunteers has remained fairly consistent over last year, with no change in the distribution of males and females or in the range of ages. Ethnicity of children has shifted slightly, with a small increase in the percentage of African American(+2.6%) and Latino (1%) children. There has also been a small drop in the percentage of Native American (-1.1%) and Caucasian (-1.7%) children.

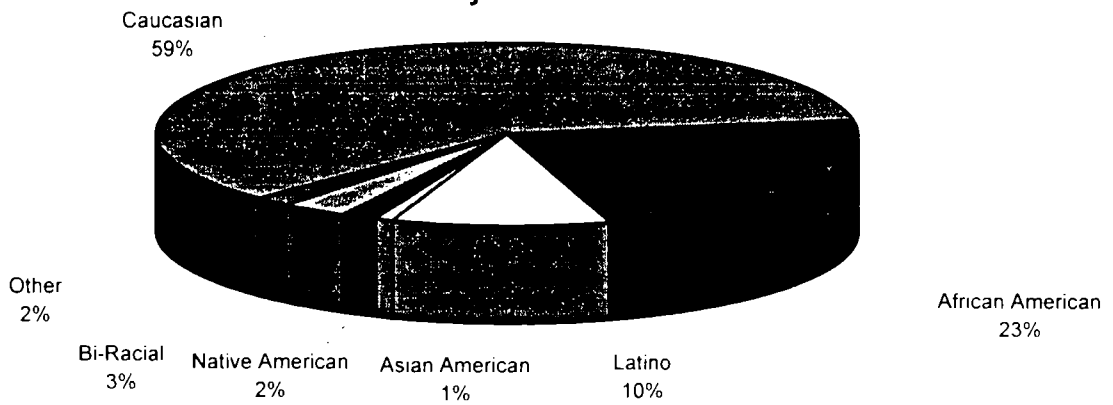
Ages of Children



Gender of Children

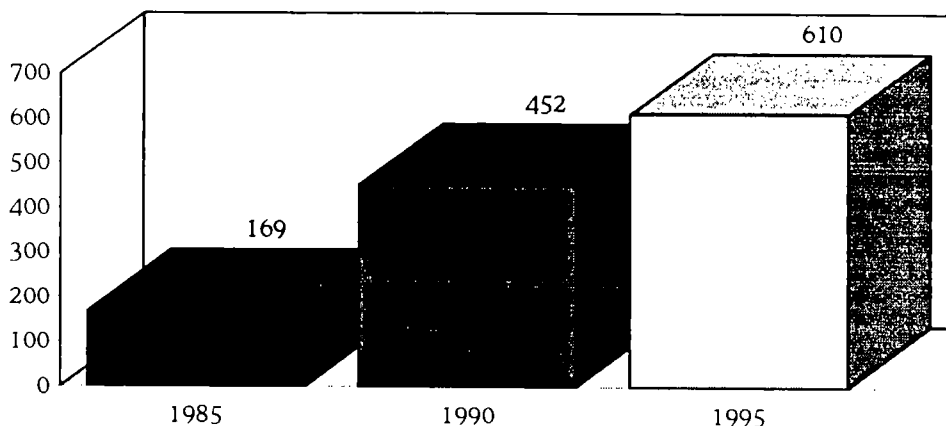


Ethnicity of Children

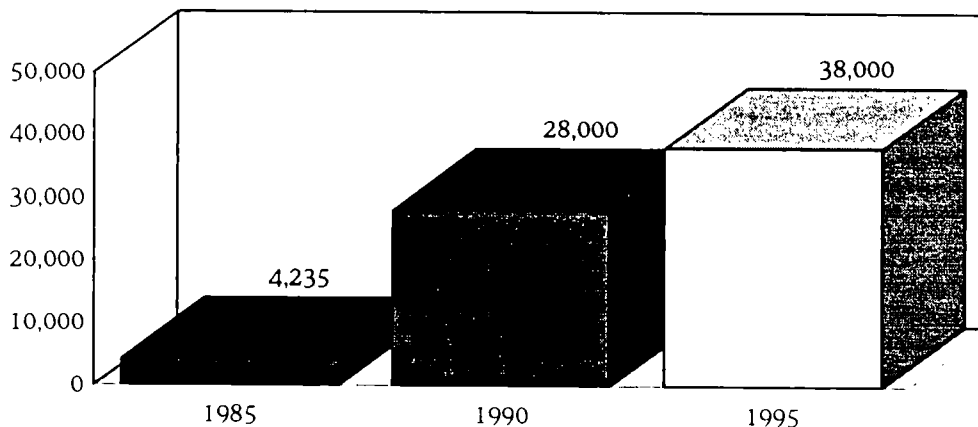


CASA's Rapid Rise

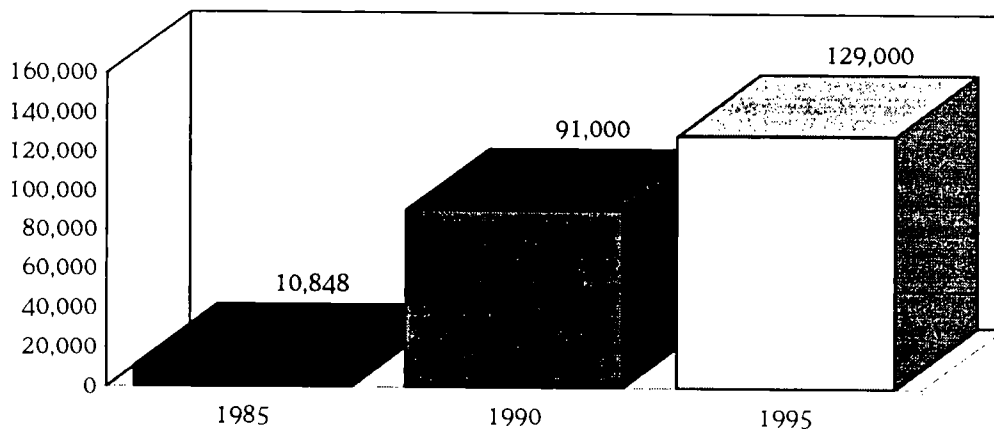
Number of CASA Programs



Number of CASA Volunteers



Number of Children with a CASA Volunteer



Sources: 1985, 1990 and 1995 National CASA Association Program Survey Reports

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SUPPORT FOR C COURT A APPOINTED S SPECIAL A ADVOCATES

INDEPENDENT STUDIES

"Child abuse and neglect is a problem of such magnitude and complexity that significant cooperation between the public and private sectors is essential if it is to be remediated . . .

"Formal volunteer programs can make an extraordinary difference. Historically, children have been given a low priority within the legal system. Volunteers in Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), guardians ad litem, and other child advocacy programs have helped make that system more child centered."

—*Child Abuse and Neglect: Critical First Steps in Response to a National Emergency*
U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect,
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services,
Office of Human Development Services, 1990.

A 1991 study found that children who suffer abuse or neglect are:

- 53% more likely to become juvenile delinquents
- 38% more likely to be arrested as adults
- 38% more likely to become violent criminals

*CASA has been recognized by the U.S. Department of Justice as a model juvenile delinquency prevention program. When CASA's involvement in a child's case prevents later juvenile delinquency and placement, the investment in CASA representation for that one child will have paid off **40 times** over.*

"The CASA Models clearly excelled as a method of GAL representation. CASAs were highly rated by professional respondents and outshone the other models on the quantitative best interest outcome measure. The network interviews also revealed outstanding performances by the volunteers. CASAs were most effective in ensuring the family was receiving services that would lead to family reunification . . .

"Due to these factors — thorough case investigation, independence of viewpoint, monitoring of the case, positive relationships with the child and assistance in securing needed services — we give the CASA models our highest recommendation."

—*National Evaluation of the Impact of Guardians Ad Litem in Child Abuse and Neglect Judicial Proceedings*
Prepared by CSR, Incorporated for the
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1988.

What We Do

The National CASA Association

Organized in 1984, The National **Court Appointed Special Advocate** Association supports a national network of volunteer child advocates who speak for the best interests of abused and neglected children in court. Our work is multi-faceted:

- ◆ We provide consultation and training around the country in communities which are developing CASA programs. At present new programs are starting at the rate of three per month.
- ◆ We provide ongoing technical assistance to our 641 existing programs in person, by phone, and in writing.
- ◆ We formulate national standards and recommended management practices for CASA programs and volunteers, and strive for broad compliance.
- ◆ We offer training in all aspects of program management at our annual national conference, at state conferences, and at local training events.
- ◆ We develop educational materials for program managers addressing issues like program development, resource development, communications, public relations, and cultural competence.
- ◆ We provide a 40-hour training curriculum for CASA and Guardian ad Litem (GAL) volunteers. The curriculum is updated constantly to reflect changes in law, new insights on child development, and evolving sociocultural understandings.
- ◆ We supply a handbook indispensable to CASAs and GALs in formulating their recommendations to the court. Along with much else, it covers courtroom procedures, interviewing techniques, and criteria for decision-making.
- ◆ We administer a federal government grant program to promote the development and expansion of CASA programs around the country.
- ◆ We publicize the challenges and successes of the CASA movement through our national newsletters, *The Connection* and *Speak Up!*.
- ◆ We work to raise public consciousness of the CASA movement through informational brochures, posters, public service announcements, and videos.



NATIONAL COURT APPOINTED SPECIAL ADVOCATE ASSOCIATION

100 WEST HARRISON STREET
NORTH TOWER, SUITE 500
SEATTLE, WA 98119

206.270.0072 OR 1.800.628.3233

CASA

Court Appointed Special
Advocates - believe these

children deserve every chance at a safe, loving, permanent home. Trained community volunteers, these women and men are appointed by a judge to speak up for abused and neglected children in court. With the information provided by CASA volunteers, judges are able to make informed decisions as to what is best for the child - foster care, reunification, or adoption. And those decisions can happen in a more timely fashion, so these children still have a chance at a childhood.

CASA volunteers work with attorneys and social workers. They review records, research information and talk to everyone involved - parents, teachers, family members, and of course, the child. From this information, they present a recommendation to the judge as to what is best for this child.

WHAT DOES IT TAKE?

- ◆ Commitment to children.
- ◆ Objectivity.
- ◆ Responsibility.
- ◆ Communication skills.
- ◆ The ability to talk with different kinds of people, some of whom will be wrestling with difficult problems.
- ◆ About 10 - 15 hours a month.

No special experience is required. CASA volunteers come from all cultures, ethnicities, professions and educational backgrounds. Once accepted, volunteers are trained in courtroom procedure, social services, the juvenile justice system, and the special needs of children who've been abused and neglected. There is a particular need for men and people of color.

"As a judge, I had to make tough decisions. I had to decide whether to take a child from the only home he's ever known, or leave him someplace where he might possibly be abused. I needed someone who could tell me what was best for that child - from the child's viewpoint. That's what CASA does."

David Soukup
Founder of CASA

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Only one out of four abused and neglected children currently have someone speaking up for their best interests. You can offer your skills and time with CASA - one of the most challenging and rewarding volunteer opportunities you can find. Contact National CASA to find out information on the CASA program closest to you. Some programs are known by other names, such as Volunteer Guardian Ad Litem, Voices for Children and Child Advocates. CASA Programs are located in all 50 states.

You can also help by contributing to National CASA, a non-profit organization that depends upon private contributions in order to advocate for our most vulnerable children. All gifts of \$25 or greater are acknowledged in our quarterly newsletter, The Connection and include a year's subscription. If your gift is in honor or in memory of someone, notification will be sent to the individual or family designated. Most importantly, your generosity enables more children who have been abused, neglected, or abandoned to have a CASA volunteer working to safeguard their interests and protect them from further harm. Contributions are tax deductible. Please make your checks payable to National CASA Association and mail to:

National CASA Association
100 W. Harrison St.
North Tower, Suite 500
Seattle, WA 98119
1-800-628-3293

A ten-year-old boy spends half of his life in foster care in seven different homes. A three year-old girl is returned to a home where she is once again harmed by her mother's boyfriend. It is all too easy for these children to become lost in an overburdened child welfare system where no one has sufficient time to devote to the best interests of an individual child.

Over 450,000 children are currently in foster care or institutions. They are now part of the court system, waiting for a judge to decide their futures.



WHAT IS CASA?

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A Publication for
CASA/GAL Volunteers

CASA VOICES GROW STRONGER



© Marilyn Holt

As National CASA celebrated the growth of the CASA/GAL network, board members and staff continued to explore how to meet the needs created by this growth. With extensive input from the CASA/GAL network, a strategic plan was finalized and implemented. In August, state representatives from 37 states and from the District of Columbia and the U.S. Virgin Islands gathered in Portland, Oregon to discuss a variety of topics, including program evaluation, revision of National CASA standards and recommended management practices and legislative trends at the national and local levels.

National CASA awarded 75 grants to CASA/GAL programs and state associations. The funding is available through a \$5 million Justice Department grant to expand CASA representation of abused and neglected children. The continuing alliance with the Kappa Alpha Theta Foundation benefited numerous CASA/GAL programs as well as National CASA efforts, particularly on public awareness issues.

(Continued on page eleven)

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casa®



A child's voice in court.

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Newsweek

MY TURN

ONE CHILD AT A TIME

I'm a court-appointed advocate for abused kids trying to save them before they're lost forever

BY MARGARET CRANE

THE 10-YEAR-OLD CAME TOWARD ME. SHE LOOKED like a typical preteen: small-boned with a face like a flower, dark eyes and a tiny turned-up nose covered by freckles resembling sprinkles of nutmeg. Her shoulder-length blond hair was pulled back with a black velvet headband. She started talking animatedly about her friends, her favorite subjects in school and how much she loved to ride a 10-speed bike. This was my first meeting with Mary (not her real name) a year ago.

The more she talked, the less she resembled the child I'd read about who had lived through torment that most of us never experience in our worst nightmares. She entered the juvenile system five years ago. She had been sexually abused by an uncle, her father and her father's friend. Her divorced mother, an attractive woman who is borderline retarded, is now seeing a man whose children may be taken from him by the state. The boyfriend has a history of child abuse documented in a report that is longer than a Russian novel. The child's paternal grandfather molested another of his daughters and served time in prison.

Since Mary was removed from her home, she has been caught in that purgatory known as protective care and passed around like a stack of papers—three foster homes, two residential treatment centers and eight schools. Her appearance is deceptive. When I first met her, she was very troubled. She wet her pants and was on medication to control the problem. She behaved sexually toward boys and could get verbally and physically aggressive. She threatened suicide a couple of times and mutilated herself, pulling out her hair or banging her head against a wall during tantrums. With intensive therapy she has learned to better manage her anger.

I am Mary's Court Appointed Special Advocate—a voice speaking up for her in court. I'm neither a social worker nor a lawyer, but a trained volunteer assigned by a family-court judge to look out for Mary's "best interests" so she doesn't languish in protective custody.

I became a CASA after a friend asked me to get involved. She felt that I could empathize with these kids because of the complexities of my own childhood. I agreed to do it and went through 30 hours of training, because as a mother of three healthy kids, I felt I could not ignore other children who are in greater need. My only hesitation was the time commitment. I'm a freelance writer, and I was concerned about juggling two jobs.

There are some 37,000 advocates like me across the country. We telephone and visit families, gathering facts to track kids and their parents who get lost in the labyrinth of foster care. CASAs report their findings to judges who often have just minutes to decide where a child will live and for how long.

The importance of our work is underscored by the highly publi-

cized death of Elisa Izquierdo, 6, in New York last month. Elisa, living with her father, was returned to her mother after his death last year. Her mother allegedly smashed the child's head against a wall. How do these youngsters fall through the cracks? In my district, social workers may be assigned more than 50 cases, supervisors twice as many. CASA volunteers are assigned only one. We serve, at no cost to taxpayers, as an additional safety net, working alongside a multitude of professionals to try and ensure that children like Elisa do not return to unsafe homes.

Elisa's tragedy has spurred me to fight harder to help Mary. Since I took on her case, I've had unique access to a family file filled with incidents of abuse that would sicken the hardest heart.

In a summer hearing, the court brushed aside the mother's poor choice of companion and her lack of parenting skills, and moved toward reunifying mother and daughter. The mother's psychological evaluation suggested that she should have her child back as long as they both continued therapy and Mom attended parenting and life-skills classes. Mary was then staying with her mother every other weekend. The judge decided to increase visits by one day a week and assess the case in two months.



In September the judge ruled that Mary should return home full time under the legal, watchful eye of the Division of Family Services. Early next year the case will be reviewed for the mother to regain permanent custody. I worry that this decision will be based not only on what's best for the child but on the need to clear an overcrowded docket of a case that has gone on too long and is costing too much.

I'm not convinced living with her mother is the safest place for Mary. Mom is a good person who loves her daughter. Mary loves her mother and wants to remain home. But Mom has displayed poor parental judgment in the past. Once she failed to get medical attention for Mary when she injured herself seriously on a visit.

From the beginning, I knew reunification was the goal. But I really hoped it might not happen. Those handling the case, including the social worker, therapists, lawyers and I, charted Mary's future: where she'd be safest, have friends and someone to help with her homework. In my opinion, she should be with a paternal aunt who clearly loves her niece and wants to help.

In my area, there are some 800 kids who've been removed from their homes and placed in care. Before I became an advocate, I had no idea what happened to these youngsters and never considered how I could help. As more of us fight for these abused and neglected children, perhaps the level of public awareness will be raised and we'll be able to protect more before they're lost forever.

I'm still aghast at the judge's recent decision to send the child home full time with Mom pending the final court ruling next year. The county's family services will continue to insist Mary and her mom attend therapy and have intervention services until that time, and I'll continue to monitor the whole family.

For the next few months I have a fighting chance to keep my one CASA child safe, if they let me. At least I can comfort myself with the knowledge that as long as I'm on this case, I will do the best that I can with the worst that I have to deal with.

CRANE, a writer, wife and mother, lives in Missouri.



A child's voice in court.™

Volunteers

Speaking For the Children

Court-Appointed Special Advocates

By Laura Sessions Stepp
Washington Post Staff Writer

Most late afternoons during the week, Toni Vasquez can be found shuttling her children to football and tennis or lobbing a few balls herself in her leafy green Northern Virginia suburb. Weekends she attends the local Presbyterian church or tours college campuses with her daughter and son, both prospective freshmen.

Workdays, however, may find Vasquez telling a juvenile judge why he shouldn't send a 2-year-old back home to the father who sexually assaulted her, or reassuring a 13-year-old that she doesn't have to return to the mother who gave her two very large scars.

Vasquez does such jobs and dozens more as a volunteer, court-appointed special advocate under the supervision of the Fairfax County Juvenile Court. She is a silk-suited, chain-smoking champion of abused and neglected children, charged with navigating an understaffed, often inefficient social welfare system on behalf of the system's most vulnerable clients. "We are the eyes and ears of the judge," is how she describes it.

She is also a member of one of the fastest-growing child advocacy movements in the country. In less than 20 years, the number of court-appointed special advocates, or CASAs as they are commonly known, has grown to more than 37,000. There are now 600

CASA programs in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, including seven in surrounding jurisdictions.

In 1974, Congress passed the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), requiring that children be represented by independent attorneys in court proceedings. The act mandated several procedures to help these guardians do their job, including immunity from prosecution.

Two years later in 1976, Superior Court Judge David Soukup got fed up with the inability of court-appointed attorneys and social workers to address the complex social needs of the children he was seeing. Impartial outsiders, he reasoned, could help him decide what truly was in the best interests of these children. He enlisted a corps of citizen volunteers, gave them the same protections as the attorneys with whom they would work and access to virtually all files relating to their charges. The CASA movement was born.

And it has flourished, receiving accolades from such admirers as former president Ronald Reagan and the American Bar Association.

But these are uncertain times for the program. Some parents' rights supporters criticize what they say is unwarranted government interference in private family matters. Others who support volunteer advocates in certain situations question whether another layer of "experts" is always necessary.

The biggest threat to their existence, these advocates believe, is Congress. In its zeal to cut federal spending and overhaul the child welfare system, the House of Representatives recently repealed most of the federal laws protecting abused and neglected children, including the guardian requirement. Protection was shifted almost entirely to the states, and funding was cut by about \$3.5 billion.

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THURSDAY, APRIL 13, 1995

Supporters of the proposed shift say that most of the protections are already state law and that many states will continue to use court-appointed advocates. "If [CASA] is a good idea,

*"We are the eyes
and ears of the
judge."*

—advocate Toni Vasquez

which I think it is, let the states do it," says Douglas Besharov, a think tank scholar who formerly directed the federal child abuse agency created by CAPTA.

But advocates are unsure. "It's not a bad idea to try out some new ideas in child protection," says Michael Piraino, CEO of the National CASA Association. "[But] eliminating all national standards of accountability . . . will not help children." If the Senate sustains the House action, he says, advocates will still be able to do their jobs but it will be much more difficult.

Since CASA workers are unpaid volunteers, the program costs very little federal money to administer—about \$3.5 million in 1995, according to Piraino, a drop in the \$6 billion-plus annual foster care budget. For some local communities even a little means a lot. In Prince George's County, for example, where CASA has had to cut its caseload in half because of inadequate funds, "we would dry up without the (federal) money," says Betsy Burian, CASA executive director.

These proposed changes come as juvenile authorities are experiencing a surge in cases of abuse and neglect. The National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse announced this week that

reported cases in 1994 increased 4 per cent over 1993, to 3.1 million. The jump in some suburbs has been particularly noticeable.

Fairfax County Juvenile Court, for example, assigned 50 children to CASA last month, compared to 18 in March, 1994. The difference cannot simply be explained by saying that judges are sending over a higher percentage of their cases, says Vivian Watts, executive director of Fairfax CASA. The office already was receiving 83 percent of the court cases; an increase in March to 100 percent would have brought in only 30 new ones.

"This is green-grass suburbia," Watts says, "but unfortunately the number of crack babies, toddlers with broken bones, young schoolchildren left to fend for themselves and sexual abuse victims of all ages has grown significantly."

One hundred forty men and women, the majority of whom have full-time jobs, volunteer for Fairfax CASA. More are needed, however: 105 children are waiting for a volunteer, the most the organization ever has had.

Vasquez decided to become an advocate about two years ago. The county volunteer office told her about CASA and 40 hours of training later, she was assigned to a custody hearing for a young girl who had watched her father shoot and kill her mother.

One of the things Vasquez remembers about that case is that the attorney appointed by the court to represent the child showed up twice, once at the first hearing and then at another session 10 months later. With the exception of the CASA workers, she says, all the parties in these cases have interests that compete with the child's—other jobs, other cases, budg-

ets, their reputation. Even the judge is confined to the law and does not delve into issues that may be critical to the child—such as schooling or health.

Or nutrition. Vasquez was at home one night preparing dinner when she received a phone call from the mother of five children Vasquez was monitoring. This mother told Vasquez she had nothing in the house for supper. What should she do?

"We went over what she had and decided she could fix spaghetti with tomato sauce," Vasquez remembers.

Vasquez has worked hard to keep this particular family intact—attending therapy sessions and parenting classes with them, tracking down the children's school attendance records. But the mother and her current husband are both substance abusers, she says, and she has come to support the idea that the children would be better off adopted. This means she now has to encourage them terminate their parental rights and seek a home that will take at least some of the children together.

Vasquez is careful to say that the officials she has worked with generally have been very cooperative. But such cooperation is not always forthcoming, according to Gay Courter, child advocate for the last five years in Florida.

Courter, author of the new book, *"I Speak for This Child: True Stories of a Child Advocate"* (Crown Publishers, \$24), describes a welfare system that often works against the victims. Mona, for example, was a caseworker who constantly referred to one of Courter's young charges as "the girl who put her sister in a microwave oven" even after the allegation had been disproved.

Iris, another worker, warned Courter she would never be able to find one

"Eliminating all national standards of accountability ... will not help children."

—Michael Piraino, National CASA Assn.

home for three sisters who had been living apart in 13 homes the previous three years. (Courter did find one.)

What those who want to reform the child protection system don't understand, advocates say, is that they are there precisely because the system doesn't work, and to make it work. This makes them ideal candidates to stay in place as states reform their child protection bureaucracies.

"If state systems are about to be turned loose to experiment with the lives of abused and neglected children, someone had better keep the children's needs at the forefront of individual cases," Piraino says.

Area CASA programs include: District, 202-328-2191; Alexandria, 703-836-1820; Fairfax, 703-273-3526; Prince William, 703-330-8145; Montgomery, 301-340-7458; Prince George's, 301-808-5687; Anne Arundel, 410-280-2254; Howard, 410-740-0933.

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Newsweek

On the Side of the Child

Family: Five years in the 'best interests' wars



Pragmatic idealist: Courter can just speak for kids, not save them

ROBERT MANN FOR NEWSWEEK

THE THING THAT STRUCK GAY COURTER about Lydia wasn't just the 16-year-old's chilling label—"the girl who put a baby in a microwave oven." What truly rattled her was how the tag stuck, even though there wasn't any truth to it. In the Kafkaesque world of foster care and shelters—where Lydia landed after the microwave nonincident—truth can be a slippery commodity. And as Courter demonstrates over and over in *I Speak for This Child* (387 pages, Crown, \$24), her compelling memoir about her years as a child advocate in Florida, the child-welfare system all too often assumes the worst about kids.

"Now you are finding out there aren't a lot of people waiting in line to take in someone who would put a baby in a microwave oven," Lydia's caseworker scolded.

"You know she never did anything remotely like that!" Courter retorts.

She's still fighting the system. After five years as a part-time guardian, Courter, a 50-year-old novelist, filmmaker and mother of two, has emerged as one of the most articulate voices in the growing debate over how to make the nation's child-welfare system more responsive to children. At a time when no one can agree who should rear the children of drug-addicted mothers, much less who has a rightful claim to Baby Richard or Baby M., Courter argues for putting

kids' needs first, "erring on the side of the child."

There are about 37,000 court-appointed guardians nationwide—compared with the estimated 500,000 children in substitute care. Their role is to help find the best home for a child, free of the conflicting biases of parents and caseworkers. When Courter volunteered in 1989, after reading about a 2-year-old foster child who was murdered by his stepfather, she saw guardianship as a bit of community service. Soon she was giving over vast chunks of her life to her young charges. These are the children of abuse

and neglect, the offspring of drug-addicted mothers and HIV-positive fathers, kids whose families are too shattered to care for them. When they land in the system, everyone breathes a sigh of relief—then forgets them. Courter the idealist wants to save every child. Courter the pragmatist is content to be their voice. "To the system, children are 'trouble units' in need of beds. One of the things I do is fight for them as people."

Or she tries to. Courter vividly depicts the lunacy of a system that conspires

against the very children it's supposed to protect. Public agencies may be good at finding a bed and three squares, but what about emotional security? Courter's villains are caseworkers like Mona, who perpetuated the microwave lie, even though a cursory probe would have found that Lydia was taking the rap for a bad-news boyfriend who had threatened to chop up her 10-year-old sister (not a baby) and put her in a microwave. Courter is just as critical of foster parents like Renata MacDougal, a dour, militaristic woman who would wipe her cat's eyes with a tissue but took back the Walkman and cowboy boots she bought one of Courter's charges for Christmas.

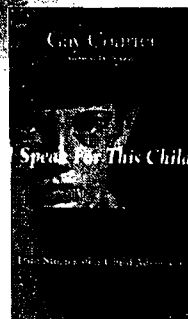
What's best: Beyond the bureaucrats lies society's failure to define what it means by the "best" interests of a child. The rules are play-as-you-go. When Courter took on Alicia, Cory and Richard Stevenson (like everyone else in the book, their identities have been changed), no one doubted that any home would be better than the one they came from. Their father, Red, had sexually abused Alicia and Richard. Their

mother had long since split. Cory, 13, so desperately wanted to live with Red that he sabotaged eight placements in eight months. "I knew that going back to his father would be disastrous. But I also knew that if he didn't go back, he wouldn't have closure," said Courter, who built in ongoing oversight so the reunion would be safe.

What Courter wants now is nothing less than an overhaul of the child-welfare system. She champions the growing minority of researchers and advocates challenging the assumption that all children belong with their biological parents. Offering kids a permanent home should be the goal, they argue, and courts need to quickly sever the rights of parents who can't or won't measure up. Courter believes it doesn't have to be all or nothing. Many parents, she says, could maintain secondary rights, guaranteeing

a connection to their children. "We throw tens of thousands of dollars' worth of services to reunite a coke-addicted mother and her kids. But we have to make hard choices." She's not just spouting political or intellectual abstractions. Though Courter has lost track of the dollars and hours she's spent as a guardian, she and her husband, Philip, a documentary filmmaker, now plan to donate half their resources to children's rights. Pity the poor children? Courter would rather stand up for them.

MICHELLE INGRASSIA



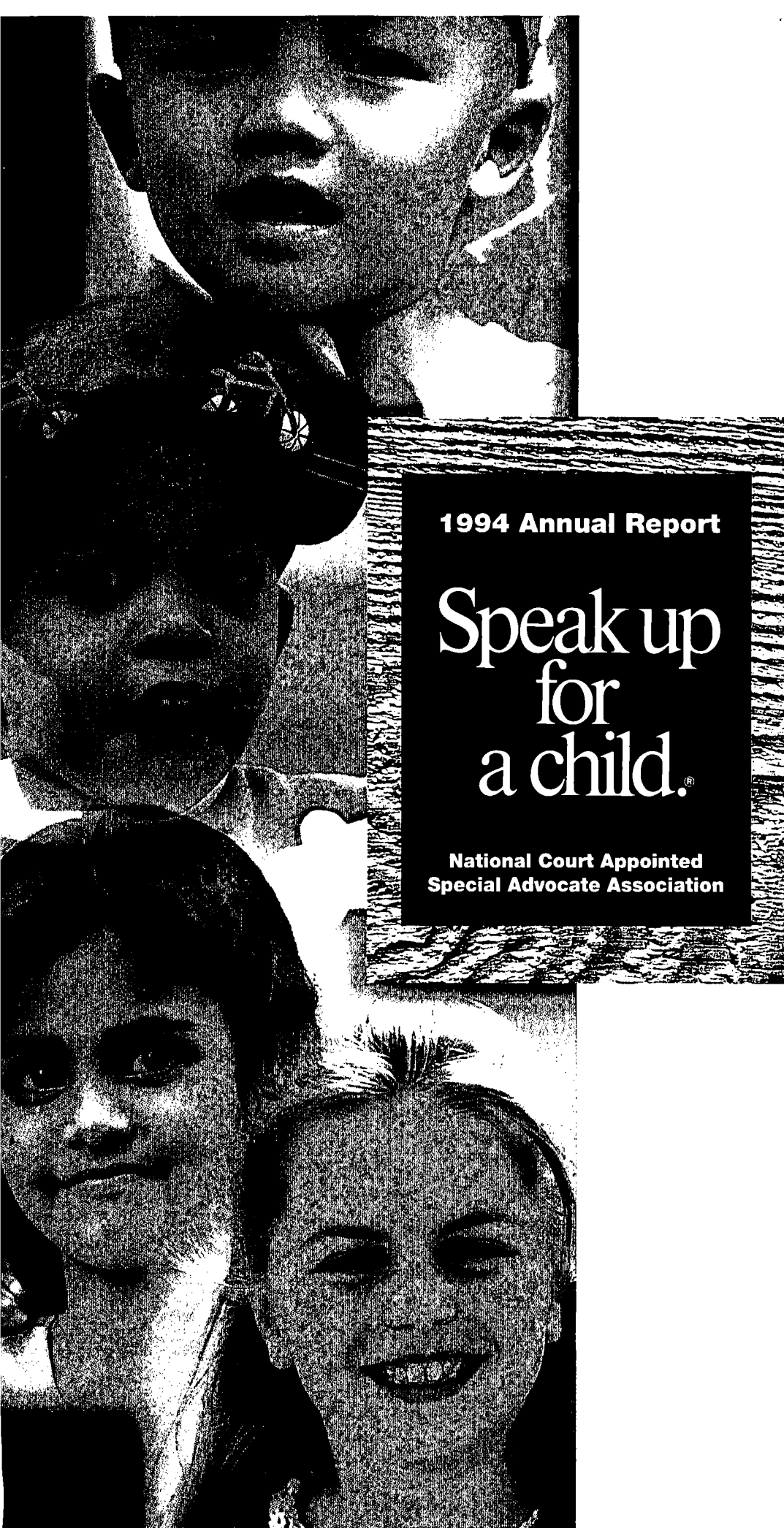
One child begged to return to the father who had abused his brother and sister

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Speak up for a child.®

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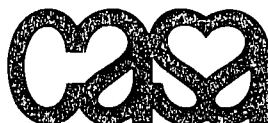
National CASA Association

MEMBER SERVICES HANDBOOK



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A Reference Guide to NCASAA Policies, Services and Resources
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