

The Case Against CASA

HOW THE MOST SACRED COW IN CHILD WELFARE HURTS THE CHILDREN IT IS MEANT TO HELP

To see the actual study discussed below, click here: <http://www.nccpr.org/reports/casa.pdf>

The trade journal *Youth Today* aptly summed up the appeal of the Court-Appointed Special Advocates Program, noting that CASA

“couldn’t sound more apple pie, more thousand points of light. CASAs are a cadre of 74,000 volunteers trained for dozens of hours, then dispatched to conduct independent investigations of child abuse and to represent the children’s interests in courts around the nation. What could be wrong with that?”

Plenty, it turns out; much of it revealed by the most comprehensive evaluation of CASA ever done, an evaluation commissioned by the National CASA Association itself. As *Youth Today* noted, the report “delivers some surprisingly damning numbers.”¹

- The study found that CASA's only real accomplishments were to prolong the time children languished in foster care and reduce the chance that the child will be placed with relatives.
- The study found no evidence that having a CASA on the case does anything to improve child safety – so all that extra foster care is for nothing. (The study *specifically controlled* for CASA's all purpose excuse for this – the claim that CASAs handle the most difficult cases.)
- The study also found that when a CASA is assigned to a child who is Black, the CASA spends, on average, significantly less time on the case. (The study also found that CASAs don't spend as much time on cases in general as the organization's p.r. might lead one to believe. CASA volunteers reported spending an average of only 4.3 hours per month on cases involving white children, and only 2.67 hours per month on cases involving Black children).²

A *Youth Today* columnist aptly summed up the findings this way:

“The more rigorous evaluation ... not only challenged the effectiveness of the court volunteers’ services, but suggested that they spend little time on cases, particularly those of black children, and are associated with more removals from the home and fewer efforts to reunite children with parents or relatives.”³

In short, CASA is one more thumb tilting the scales of justice against families.

None of this should come as a surprise. Like most people in child welfare, CASA volunteers and the paid staff who support them at the local and national level mean well; they really want to do what’s best for vulnerable children. And a few CASA chapters have avoided the problems discussed here. But children suffer enormously from CASA’s well-meaning blunders.

The problems are built into the CASA model. Who has time to spend even 4.3 hours a month on a case? Certainly not a poor person holding down two jobs. So it’s no wonder CASA programs sometimes are pet projects of the local Junior League and the demographics of CASAs tend to be vastly different from the demographics of the families they judge. **All over America, CASA volunteers, who are mostly middle class and 90 percent white, march into the homes of people who are overwhelmingly poor and disproportionately minority. Then, the CASAs pass judgment on the families and recommend whether they ever should get their children back.** The CASA is the *de-facto* judge, since the real judges almost always rubber-stamp their recommendations.

Rather than respond to the findings of its own study by cleaning up its act, CASA tried first to spin the results and then to bury them. *Youth Today* concluded that CASA’s spin “can border on duplicity.”⁴

The study was consigned to an obscure corner of a website meant primarily for CASAs themselves, then removed entirely. That's why NCCPR has made it available here:

<http://www.nccpr.org/reports/casa.pdf>

The study isn't the only evidence of the bias that permeates CASA:

- Although a CASA is supposed to evaluate the entire case objectively, the website for the Indianapolis CASA program declares every family from whom a child is taken is guilty. According to the website "volunteers help ensure that the children we fight to protect *are not returned to the very situations where the mistreatment occurred*"⁵ [emphasis added].

- In Arkansas City, Kansas, in 2009, where the big annual fundraiser for CASA is a drag queen contest, the winner of the talent competition and the "Miss CASA" title was the local mayor. He dressed up as a woman to whom he gave a surname described as "graphic slang for a female private part." So is the name the mayor chose for his back-up dancers. Oh, and one more thing: The mayor did his act made-up in blackface.

The local CASA director said she was mortified when someone explained what the surname meant. Other than that though, she gave the performance a rave review, telling a local news website: "The part of his act I felt was excellent was the dancing. It was good dancing. The back-up singers were gorgeous and could probably back up any professional. ... We may change some things. We may not. We certainly don't want to offend anybody." As for the blackface, the CASA director said she didn't think the mayor was trying to portray a different race: "It wasn't black black," she said. "It was all really just tan." It was not until after the National CASA Association went into damage control mode and set up a conference call with the local chapter, the state chapter and the local NAACP that the local chapter apologized.⁶

- CASAs also behaved reprehensibly in high-profile cases in Texas, Florida and Washington State.⁷

- Throughout the country, local CASA chapters continue to state or imply that they are "a child's voice" in court. They are not. A CASA advocates for whatever the CASA thinks is best for the child. So if the child desperately wants to go home, but the CASA thinks that's a bad idea, the CASA pushes as hard as she can *against* what the child wants; the child effectively is silenced. (While it is much less likely to happen, if a child wants to stay in foster care and the CASA wants the child to return home, again, the child is silenced – and that is equally wrong.)

Children do need a voice in court – a real one. From the age a child is old enough to express a rational preference she or he should get a lawyer to fight for that preference. That doesn't mean children always should get what they want. But the best way to find out what truly is best for a child is if everyone has an articulate advocate making his or her case. Deciding what is best is what we pay judges for. It's time we stopped ceding that role to amateurs.

For more about CASA see the posts to the *NCCPR Child Welfare Blog* available here:

<http://bit.ly/5Z8HQ3>

January 10, 2010

¹ Barbara White Stack, "An Evaluation of Volunteers Courts Controversy," *Youth Today*, July 2004, available online by subscription at http://www.youthtoday.org/publication/article.cfm?article_id=933

² Caliber Associates, Evaluation of CASA Representation: Final Report (Undated, but published in 2004). NCCPR has made this report available online at <http://www.nccpr.org/reports/casa.pdf>

³ Karen Pittman, "Evaluation: Risk or Responsibility," *Youth Today*, October, 2004, available online at <http://www.forumforyouthinvestment.org/node/162>

⁴ Stack, note 1, supra.

⁵ See the website for Child Advocates of Marion County, In., here: http://www.childadvocates.net/about_us.php

⁶ For much more on this incident, and full sources, see the discussion on the *NCCPR Child Welfare Blog* here: <http://bit.ly/46quHX>

⁷ For details, see these posts to the NCCPR Child Welfare Blog, <http://bit.ly/8zEyHL> and <http://bit.ly/4Qovc0>