

Just What Is A CASA?

As a Court Appointed Special Advocate, or CASA, you are a volunteer who serves as an advocate for a child or group of siblings who are involved in formal child protective proceedings due to abuse or neglect on the part of child's parents or guardians.



In this role with Kalamazoo CASA, you'll become a sworn officer of the Court. To get there, you'll go through an extremely thorough training to help you best protect your precious cargo. Once trained, you'll be appointed and sworn in by the Kalamazoo County Ninth Circuit Court to serve in your role officially.

The kids in these child protective Court proceedings deserve to have at least one person who can provide consistent, continuous, and reliable advocacy for their best interest until all legal matters are resolved. Frequently, only the CASA remains a constant from beginning to end.

As a CASA volunteer, you'll provide the Court with an independent assessment of all aspects of your youngster's life, including things like their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. You'll be asked to provide an assessment of the child's best interests for a safe, permanent living environment as quickly as possible.

CASAs handle questions like:

- If the child is removed, how will s/he relate within a new home, a new school, new surroundings, and visitation with his/her parent(s)?
- What's being done to safely return the child home as soon as possible?
- Are court orders being followed by all parties within an appropriate time period?
- Are actual changes being made in the family structure or is compliance with court orders only a means to an end?
- Should a child be removed from his/her own home?

In your role, you'll meet with your assigned child, as well as any other people involved in the child's life such as natural parent/s, DHS caseworkers, attorney, primary caregivers, teachers, extended family members, and therapists.

As you do your work, you'll hang out with your CASA-appointed child and you may even take them for excursions like field trips, playground visits, restaurants, and other fun activities.

As you do all this, you'll observe, gather, and document information and facts – and your recommendations – to help the Court determine what is in the best interests of the kid/s you're assigned to.

CASAs most often work independently but may also partner with another CASA. Volunteers are well supported through monthly group meetings, assistance from active volunteers, and a responsive court staff on 24-hour call.

Are you CASA material? If you want to ensure that the best interests of abused and neglected children are upheld, you might make a great CASA.

Initial requirements to become a CASA:

- 21+ years old
- Commit to a minimum of 18 months of service
- Attend regularly scheduled hearings and monthly meetings
- Follow a case to completion
- Have your own insured vehicle
- Complete a 35-hour training program
- Uphold standards of confidentiality
- Ability to remain objective

“Having a CASA meant the world to me.”

The CASA Role, In Detail

Make no mistake, there's a lot involved in being a Court Appointed Special Advocate, or CASA. But it's critically important work – after all you'll be advocating for some of the most precious cargo – children. As abused and neglected youth, they are relying on you to help be their voice as court proceedings involving their future play out.



So, let's look at the specific duties of a Kalamazoo CASA. They include, but are not limited to:

1. Become familiar with the facts and circumstances underlying the allegation(s). Information gathering will likely include interviewing the child, the child's siblings, parents, social workers, care providers, and any other people necessary to form a full and proper assessment.
2. Read and become familiar with all pertinent material contained in the Court's legal and social file. Review copies of all reports, case plans, and Court orders filed in the matter.
3. Consult with the child's attorney and other parties related to the case to help determine what is in the child's best interest.
4. Meet regularly with the child (a minimum of 1 face-to-face contact every 7-10 days).
5. Explain your role, duties, and responsibilities to all parties associated with the case.
6. Appear at all scheduled court hearings and participate in pre-trial conferences pertaining to your assigned case.
7. Offer a written report of findings and recommendations regarding the best interests of your assigned child and discuss the reports and recommendations with the program supervisor prior to submitting your reports to the Court.
8. Be able to explain the court proceedings to the child, as necessary.
9. Identify potential resources to facilitate family preservation, early family reunification, or alternative permanency planning.
10. Participate in the formulation of the case service plan by making recommendations with regard to appropriate services, programming, and suggesting alternative solutions.
11. Determine whether services for the family, specified in court approved case plans and court orders, are provided in a timely manner and are accomplishing their intended purpose. The CASA will also inform the Court of any barriers that prevent, or may potentially prevent, the family's ability to take advantage of the services. These services may include: evaluations, assessments, home-based services, and/or treatment for the child and their family.

12. Be familiar with the facts of the case, as well as the interests of the child, in judicial or administrative proceedings outside of the Kalamazoo County Ninth Circuit Court – Family Division (i.e., criminal proceedings in which the child are cited as a victim and/or witness).
13. Always advocate for the child’s best interest in the mental health, educational, welfare, juvenile justice, and other community systems when related to the circumstances bringing the child within the court’s jurisdiction.
14. File written monthly reports with the program director.
15. Be familiar and comply with the State of Michigan’s Child Protection Law and Juvenile Code.
16. Report known or suspected incidents of child abuse and neglect immediately to the program director and to the appropriate authorities.
17. Conduct yourself professionally at all times and do your best to maintain cooperation with all parties involved in the case.
18. Remain actively involved in his/her assigned case until permanency is achieved and/or wardship is terminated.
19. Attend monthly trainings/support groups of the Kalamazoo County CASA Program. (Nine 2-hour sessions scheduled per year.)

You explicitly may not and will not:

- Provide services to the child or the family
 - Take a child to the CASA’s home
- Give legal advice or therapeutic counseling
- Make placement arrangements for the child
- Give money or expensive gifts to the child or family
- Be related to anyone involved in the case or be employed in a position and/or agency that might result in a conflict of interest

“Without my CASA’s support, I would not have graduated high school. In fact, I might not even be here today.”

Things to Consider Before Becoming a CASA

There's no doubt you have the best intentions in wanting to become a Court Appointed Special Advocate, or CASA, and protect kids. But we want to be honest with you: this role is a BIG responsibility – for them and for you. **So, let's have some real-talk, shall we?**

The work of a CASA is challenging in many ways; particularly emotionally and timewise. It requires a lengthy and often difficult commitment. But it's also tremendously rewarding.



It is vital to the children, the Court, the CASA program, and to yourself that you make the decision to become a CASA having full knowledge of your own expectations, as well as those of the program. Our hope is that these questions allow you to examine areas of your life that are likely to be impacted in your work as a CASA, as well as exploring your “fitness” to take on such a crucial role. Think about your responses to explore your readiness to take on the very important role of CASA.

1. DO YOU HAVE THE TIME?

The time commitment of being a CASA can vary pretty widely. Some weeks there may not be much more than an hour of work. Other weeks as Court proceeds could demand much more of your time. It all depends on how the case is going, so there's a need to be flexibly available. There may be times you fulfilled your responsibilities for the day and are anticipating time for yourself...then remember you must write a CASA report for the Court for tomorrow. Or what about a weekend interrupted by a phone call from your CASA kid/s saying they need to talk... today. Will you be willing and able to give up your free time to make that important time for them? Do you really have time to see the children every week? Will you have time to visit others involved in the children's lives – teachers, caseworkers, counselors, and others? Is your work/school schedule flexible enough to allow you to attend the required Court hearings during the day?

2. HAVE YOU RECENTLY GONE THROUGH SIGNIFICANT LIFE CHANGES?

Life events such as marriage, divorce, illness or death of a loved one, birth of a child, new home or job, etc. are events that cause stress and uncertainty. If you've recently experienced any of these (or others), consider whether you are ready to take on the role of as an advocate for abused and neglected children. This work often comes with emotionally charged circumstances that require your 100% attention and commitment.

3. ARE YOU LIKELY TO EXPERIENCE SCHOOL- OR JOB-RELATED PRESSURE?

Are you about to take on a new position or add responsibility to the roles you currently have? Is there a chance you may be transferred in the next year? Are you entering a significant time in school that will add additional pressure?

4. WHAT ABOUT YOUR FAMILY, SPOUSE, LIFE PARTNER?

Have you talked with your significant other and your own kids about taking on this big new role? How did they react? Do you feel like you do not spend enough time with them already? Do you have any added responsibilities within your family?

5. WHAT KIND OF ROLE MODEL WILL YOU BE FOR YOUR CASA KIDS?

Have you had positive experiences in your own childhood? Have you had positive experiences in raising your own children, or with others you may have spent time with? The children you'll be working with may be traumatized and experiencing some very difficult circumstances. Do you feel capable of meeting them where they are and being compassionate to their situations? Are you ready and willing to speak up for them in Court and with professionals? Are you willing to communicate with angry parents, difficult professionals, attorneys who may try to discredit you, judges, and most importantly, a traumatized, unsure, and frightened child?

6. WHAT DO YOU HOPE YOUR EXPERIENCE AT CASA WILL BRING YOU?

It's important to approach your CASA role with your intention of advocating for a child as the main priority. Undoubtedly, you'll find your role as a CASA rewarding, after all, you'll be playing a significant role for children in Court and in the community. However, it is essential that you are able to keep a healthy perspective and not allow an ego to get in the way.

7. ARE YOU PATIENT?

Are you able to await factual information to substantiate and formulate a decision you'll make about parents, children, and others? Can you maintain a high level of energy over a period of months, even if you feel the "system" could have operated differently for children? Can you accept that others may need more time to accomplish tasks that you have already completed or can accomplish quickly?

8. DO YOU HAVE A TENDENCY TO BE JUDGEMENTAL?

Can you agree and understand that other people's lifestyles – though different from your own – can be acceptable for children, provided their lifestyles are not illegal or harmful to the kids in a specific, provable way?

9. EXAMINE AND ASSESS YOUR EMOTIONAL HEALTH.

With the help of the CASA program director, other CASAs, and those in your personal support network, will you be able to take care of yourself in the times that are likely to prove emotionally stressful in your CASA work? This is very important for many reasons, particularly because the kids assigned to you need to be protected from yet another person abandoning them.

10. WILL YOU BE ABLE TO "LET GO"?

After the case closes and you have provided intensive advocacy for children, will you be able to stand back and let the natural parents, the guardians, or adoptive parents take on their proper responsibility? Will you be able to move on and allow the children to do the same?

Questions? Contact Kelly Kucinich, Director, Kalamazoo County CASA Program
269-385-6078 | kakuci@kalcounty.com

“My CASA felt like a big sister. She listened and never judged. I feel like I have a best friend forever.”



VOLUNTEER APPLICATION

I'm applying to:

<input type="checkbox"/> Become a CASA, a court-sworn volunteer advocate	<input type="checkbox"/> Join the Champions Team, a band of non-sworn community advocates raising awareness and support for CASA across the County	<input type="checkbox"/> Either or both!
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Full Name:	
Maiden Name, if applicable:	
Alias/Nickname:	
Date of Birth:	
Full Address:	
Dates of Residence:	
Previous Address:	
Dates of Residence:	
Home Phone:	
Work Phone:	
Cell Phone:	
Email:	
Emergency Contact (name/number)	
Driver's License/State ID #*:	

*Please provide a copy of your driver's license with your application

Transportation options available to you:

__ Personal automobile __ Public transit __ Other _____

Language(s) spoken: _____

How did you hear about CASA?

What personal qualities do you have you feel will contribute to volunteering with us?

What skills, talents, or hobbies do you have that could assist in working with kids?

What other community activities are you involved in (including past and present volunteer service)?

Have you, or any member of your family, had any personal experience involving the legal system, Child Protective Services, foster care, or any other agencies offering services to a child? ___Yes ___No

Do you have any medical and/or physical conditions that would impair your overall physical ability and/or driving, thereby preventing you from visiting the assigned child(ren) or others associated with a potential CASA case? ___Yes ___No

Have you ever been convicted of a criminal act? ___Yes ___No

EMPLOYMENT INFORMATION

Are you currently employed?	
Occupation:	
Employer:	
Contact Person & Phone:	
Employer Address:	
Length of employment:	
May we contact this employer?	

If you are not currently employed or have been working for your current employer less than 1 year, list your last 2 employers:

Occupation:	
Employer:	
Contact Person & Phone:	
Employer Address:	
Length of employment:	
May we contact this employer?	

Occupation:	
Employer:	
Contact Person & Phone:	
Employer Address:	
Length of employment:	
May we contact this employer?	

REFERENCES

Please list 3 references of people unrelated to you. They should each know you well enough to describe your personality and work ethic.

1.) **Name:** _____
 Address: _____ Phone: _____
 How does this person know you? _____
 Does this person know you are identifying him/her as a reference? _____

2.) **Name:** _____
 Address: _____ Phone: _____
 How does this person know you? _____
 Does this person know you are identifying him/her as a reference? _____

3.) **Name:** _____
 Address: _____ Phone: _____
 How does this person know you? _____
 Does this person know you are identifying him/her as a reference? _____

When completed, please return this form to:
 Kelly Kucinich, Director, Kalamazoo County CASA Program
kakuci@kalcounty.com or 1536 Gull Road • Kalamazoo, Michigan 49048