



## Statewide Study Response

An article discussing statewide data in connection with CASA was recently released, and we want to share information specific to Travis County.

We're lucky in Travis County to work as part of a collaborative community that has been deemed a model court by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, and we recognize that our efforts take place in a larger context that includes the courts, the legal community, Child Protective Services and other stakeholders.

### **Permanence**

In 2018, CASA of Travis County served 1,811 children, of whom 763 had their cases closed during the year with 84% of those cases ending in permanent homes. Of the remaining 1,048 children, approximately 800 of those were new in 2018 and more likely to close within 2019. That means that only around 13% of the children we served would have had cases that began prior to 2018 but were not closed by the end of that year.

Regarding permanence generally, CASA of course does not actually make decisions—judges do that—and we work as part of a community effort to find safe and expeditious stability and permanence for children and youth. CASA's legal duty is to make informed recommendations to the court as to the best interests of children who've been abused or neglected. CASA volunteers are appointed to a child or family of children and spend an average of 15–20 hours a month advocating for these children for the lifetime of a case. They get to know the child while also gathering information from the child's family, teachers, doctors, therapists, caregivers and anyone else involved in the child's life. Approximately 4 times a year, CASA volunteers write a detailed court report and appear in the courtroom to make informed recommendations directly to the judge.

Judges value CASA's recommendations, which help them make decisions in the child's best interest. From a 2018 survey, Travis County judges strongly agreed that children and families are better served when a CASA volunteer is involved. 100% of stakeholders surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that CASA enhances the process of achieving permanency for children.

The average length of time that a case to which CASA is appointed stays open is 17 months, and this reflects the efforts of the system as a whole to ensure that children do not linger in foster care. In those situations when CASA may advocate for cases to remain open, it is often to assure that children and families receive continued or additional services and supports to be better able to sustain their independence from the system and to avoid returning to care in the future.

### **CASA of Travis County's Commitment to Keeping Children with Family**

It is CASA of Travis County's first priority on cases to keep children with their own family or within their community whenever safe, and, since 2013, we have been developing and refining innovative initiatives dedicated to this priority.

Our Early Family Engagement program supports our family engagement efforts by keeping children connected to their families from the earliest stage of a case. In just the first two weeks of a case, our EFE team increases the number of relatives identified for a child by 46% from those initially identified by CPS in the case and increases the number of relatives engaged in the case by 36%.

Once our Early Family Engagement work ends, our Family Finding program works to ensure that we are focused on finding family for all the children to whom we are appointed and keeping family engaged throughout the life of their case.

These efforts have borne fruit. Within our open cases, 70% of children are currently placed with relatives, parents or fictive kin. In 2018, 79% of the cases we helped to close were reunified with parents or living permanently with relatives.

### Additional CASA of Travis County Initiatives

**Combating Disproportionality and Systemic Racism in Child Welfare:** The child welfare system as a whole has a problem with disproportionality and systemic racism. Across the system, professionals and volunteers do not reflect the race/ethnicities of the children being served. CASA of Travis County is part of the Child Welfare Race Equity Collaborative and we sit on the Model Court Executive Committee and Disproportionality Subcommittee. The bulk of our staff and all of our leadership have completed race/equity trainings such as Undoing Racism, Beyond Diversity and Knowing Who You Are. We facilitate 6 annual Knowing Who You Are trainings for staff, volunteers and other stakeholders.

While our volunteer pool does not yet reflect the racial/ethnic makeup of our county, we are actively working towards that with dedicated staff and recruitment/advertising efforts focused on bringing in volunteers from historically underrepresented parts of the community. So far in 2019, 35% of our new volunteer applications have come from people of color. Like the rest of the system, we have a long way to go, and we are committed to inclusiveness and to combating disproportionality.

**Teen Advocacy & Permanency Project:** For the small percentage of youth for whom permanence is not likely and who may age out of the system (5% of closed cases in 2018), we have developed the Teen Advocacy and Permanency Project (TAPP). TAPP serves youth who are at risk of becoming adults without a family or other long-term supports. Through specialized advocacy in the areas of education, preparation and healthy connections, and ongoing family finding, TAPP works to reverse negative trends for youth who often have fewer living options and may require a high level of care.

**Child Safety:** Children and youth in the child welfare system are vulnerable to ongoing abuse and exploitation. CASA of Travis County is the first and only CASA program in the country to become accredited for excellence in child safety practices by Praesidium, Inc., a company focused on abuse prevention. CASA has more than 20 Certified Praesidium Guardians on staff.

**Domestic Violence:** We've identified children being removed due to domestic violence as a primary cause of family separation. As a result, we co-chair the domestic violence subcommittee of the Model Court with one of our judges in order to shift the way the system responds to families experiencing domestic violence in a way that preserves children's relationships with non-offending parents.

**Drug Court:** For more than a decade, CASA has been a partner in the Travis County Family Drug Treatment Court, a specialized program for families whose primary factor in child neglect is substance abuse. The Drug Court program, available to a limited number of parents and staffed by a small, dedicated group of stakeholders, strives to keep children with their parents by surrounding the family with support services and extra resources (such as inpatient treatment and housing) and by requiring greater oversight.

### Conclusion

Although the study in question was not commissioned by CASA of Travis County and does not address Travis County specifically at all, we think it's important to note that the purpose of the study was to identify areas of improvement for CASA statewide. Here in Austin, we are committed to ongoing evaluation, and we recognize that some of the impact of CASA is very difficult to measure. One of our long-time volunteers, Jack, tells the story of an emotional hearing in which he advocated strongly about where the young man to whom he was appointed should live after the youth experienced a serious loss. In making a ruling based on our recommendation, the Judge told the young man that she didn't want him to feel alone and he said, "I'm not alone, I have CASA." As one of our judges noted in a 2018 survey: "We need 100% of our kids with a CASA." Our goal at CASA of Travis County is to constantly deepen the quality of our advocacy for the children we serve in pursuit of our vision—and our judge's vision—of a trained volunteer advocate, a safe home and a promising future for every child who needs us.