



Court Appointed Special Advocates
FOR CHILDREN

TULARE COUNTY

CASA Informed

Change a Child's Story™

2020 came and went with a blurry flurry. While there were many detrimental effects of the chaos that ensued last year, there were also an abundance of blessings. We were met with trial after trial, but we persevered, adapted, and survived. Not only did we survive, however, we thrived into a new way of living; a new way to do what we're called to do.

There are so many deserving of our thanks for their support from financial donors, individuals who organized toy drives, helped spread the word during RAISE, and contributed in any number of ways to help ensure that our children get the advocacy they deserve.

As you may have seen throughout the year, we're always searching for more individuals to dedicate a little of their time to the advocacy of kids in foster care. Last year, even with the changes to society due to COVID-19, we were able to exceed our goals. Our outreach/training team was able to recruit and train an additional 40 volunteers throughout the year and these volunteers served 87 children. This brought our total volunteers to 169 individuals who served 353 children throughout 2020.

Advocates sometimes need breaks due to life changes or more, and 169 volunteers is not a constant number, but a total for the year. Currently, we have around 110 volunteers throughout Tulare County, actively serving children/youth.

Unfortunately, cases of children being removed from their homes and placed in foster care fluctuate constantly as current cases close and new cases open. At any given moment there are between 1400-1500 children in Tulare County in the dependency program. CASA is appointed the most difficult cases, so not all children have an advocate to stand with. The need for volunteers is always pressing as nearly 250 children have been appointed to CASA of Tulare County and placed on a waiting list. This number does not include those who've already been or are being served. There aren't enough volunteers to cover the waiting list and those currently being served.

While the RAISE season may have ended, the heart of RAISE doesn't have to. As a community, it's time to RAISE awareness and support as often as we can. With over 250,000 people in Tulare County's population between 21-84 years old... 1,500 seems like a number we can accommodate. Will you help us RAISE for CASA of Tulare County?



THANK YOU, 2020 CASA SPONSORS!

- | | |
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SOCIAL DISTANCING CRAFTS



Executive Director

Dear Friends,

Noteven COVID-19 can stop the heart of our community. The end of the year RAISE for CASA campaign began on November 1, 2020-with a Live Auction/Raffle commencing on December 16, 2020. Indeed, the celebratory spirit will carry over to 2021, with more pride and a greater involvement by the community. The challenged by the unthinkable global pandemic may have halted our events. However, what it has not done is stopped us from providing advocacy to kiddos effected by abuse and neglect.

Despite the myriad challenges caused by the Coronavirus, CASA of Tulare County has responded with determination, resilience, and creativity. I could not be more proud of our kiddos, volunteers, staff, and community with respect to how quickly they adapted to remote learning, the various restrictions to not only our operations, but to our everyday normal that we have grown accustomed to, while maintaining their CASA spirit. That spirit has roared more distinctively than ever during our online training, as we had to restrict in-person trainings. We found ourselves having to be more creative, by offering our trainings online through Zoom. The results have been tremendous!

I also proudly report that the office environment has been greatly enriched by the revival of having staff back in the office(25%) There was a quietness as well as, disconnection from one another, since we were unable to come together in person as a unit. Still despite the restrictions Zoom meetings provided us with opportunities to share our visons and outlook on the challenges that we would need to face head on as a team, as an organization. This comprehensive shared vision for CASA of Tulare County, one in which the kiddos as well as, the volunteers experience and aspirations are central. Finally, I'm delighted to share that, we received an anonymous donation in the amount of 250,000. This blessing further illustrates how important our community is, in helping us fulfill our mission.

Global pandemic or not, our commitment to the health and safety of our kiddos, volunteers has never been stronger. Throughout the spring and the summer, we've kept the community updated regularly, through emails and on website, regarding COVID-19 safety guidelines and other vital information. We will continue this practice throughout the fall and next spring to ensure everyone remains informed of our latest efforts to protect the CASA's community. Moreover, during these times of societal upheaval, you can rest assured that we as an organization is more committed than ever to continuing its commitment to diversity and inclusion, and support of social justice programs.

Finally, please note that, we are not out the "woods" when it comes to COVID-19. Our county is still in Tier 1, and the risk of contracting COVID-19 is still very high. So, please



wear a mask, social distance. Let's all do our part, so that we can get back to visiting our kiddos in-person. We invite you to share any feedback and opinions regarding how we can best continue sharing news and meaningful stories about CASA. May God continue to bless us all-and may God continue to bless CASA of Tulare County!

Blessings,
Eric D. Johnson, Executive Director



Outreach & Training

Even though this year has been very challenging to everyone, I am very excited to share the amount of people that reached out through our social media and website, the number of new volunteers we got sworn-in and the great response we had from our new virtual training.

Since COVID hit our country and county we knew we had to investigate how we would transition the in-person volunteer trainings into virtual trainings. We reached out to all our in-person presenters to see if they would be willing to do it virtually and they were more than happy to do it. We also added CASA University which is an Independent study. CASA University is a website where you will find chapters that have great information, and you will have to answer questions and do small post essays.

Our virtual trainings include Zoom presentations on Tuesday's & Thursdays 5:30-7:30pm and CASA University (which can be done at your time as long as they complete it 2 weeks prior to getting sworn-in) and goes for 5 weeks.

With this new virtual opportunity, we had more students and full-time employees interested in continuing the process on becoming CASA Advocates. So far, we have 42 new volunteers and 11 that are in the middle of training.



0-5 CASA Department

Our 0-5 department remains strong and focused on our littlest kiddos. While COVID-19 has put much of our efforts into a new direction, both staff and advocates have adapted to the changes necessary to ensure our littles are taken care of. From doing our ASQ's via video chat and phone to actively checking on our volunteers during these trying times, 2020 has proved we as a community can be resilient when we come together for the greater good. An example of what advocacy looks like in Advocate Devon's experience.

"I just talked to him (the 2-year-old) while they (the resource mother and the brothers) were in the car. He (the 2-year-old) was in a great mood. They just picked him up from daycare. He is making a little more sense and is responding more to what I ask, enough for me to get the gist of what he was saying. I asked him how he was doing, and he responded with, "Good" and something I couldn't quite understand, but he mentioned the car. I asked if he was in the car coming home from daycare and he said, "Yes". He said something about home, and I asked if he was going home. He said, "Yes".

He said something else I couldn't make out, but this is an improvement from the last time he chatted on FaceTime, when all he would say was, "Hi". He is usually in such a good mood and is typically excited to talk, although he hasn't been able to say much in the past. When I spoke briefly to him in (his brother's) room early this month, he got shy and sounded like he wasn't in the best of moods, which was unusual. Today he sounded like he normally does, super cheerful and excited to interact."

I hope you can see the child's experience through the lens of this advocate's "report". It is also our hope that you can see that in small and simple ways, adults can advocate for children. Advocates can also be a great liaison between resource parents and their children.

CASA needs volunteer advocates. The foster children of Tulare County need volunteer advocates. Please contact CASA today to ask us about our next training classes.



Family Connections

The Family Connections team would like to focus on the importance of mental health awareness. One of the recommendations that experts have given during these difficult times is to have a network of support in place.

Family Connections, cont.

This includes friends and family that can be called during difficult moments in life. Prior to the pandemic the Family Connections Team had been working hard to be able to bring the kids in care exactly that; a network of support that would follow them regardless of where they lived.

Our Family Connections Team has continued to strive for what is in the best interest of the kids in foster care. The team has been implementing new ideas that would allow these kids the opportunity to continue to reach out and be connected to extended family and friends who are important to them despite the orders in place.

Such was the case for a grandmother whose opportunity for placement of her grandchildren took longer than expected despite Child Welfare Services' efforts. The Family Connections Team became involved and worked closely with the grandmother and her grandchildren ages 3, 5, and 7. One of the struggles for the grandmother was not knowing how to use technology well. The grandmother who did not have access to a computer for Zoom meetings, did not own a smart phone, and had no training on how to use social media and technology did not hesitate and took it upon herself to learn how to use an application on her new smart phone. With the help of the resource mother and the oldest child the grandmother continued to have the face-to-face contact. Not knowing technology well did not stop the resource mother and grandmother.

They continued to build on the bond that could have been interrupted had it not been for the determination on everyone's behalf. The Family Connections Team was also able to connect a maternal aunt with the children. She communicated in the same way as the grandmother did. It is important for the Family Connections Team to continue efforts to locate extended family even after the children have a permanent placement. After the children were placed with the grandmother this aunt would continue to play an important part in both the grandmother's and children's network of support. The grandmother who did not have reliable transportation due to not knowing how to drive was able to count on this aunt for transportation. The aunt assists with rides to and from doctor's appointments, therapy, and parental visits.

This is the type of network of support that the Family Connections Team strives for. Grandma shared the following with the team: *"I am happy to have my grandkids home with me. I am also happy to have learned to use my phone a lot better. It is through Facebook that I am communicating with my extended family in Mexico. They met my grandkids too. I had not seen in over ten years. Makes me happy to be able to see them at least through the phone."*

It is stories like this that makes the work and effort the Family Connections Team puts in worth it. If providing a network of support also helps alleviate some of the mental health issues that are arising from this pandemic the team will continue to work hard so that others can benefit, if not in the same, in a similar way.

6 - 21 CASA Department

One of our CASA youth who has been in the system for a long time, recently wrote a poem expressing her feelings and experiences in foster care. She was able to read this poem out loud during her most recent court hearing. The judge, attorneys, and those in the audience listened intently to her words and the strong emotions behind them. CASA was right by her side as she read her poem. At the end, everyone in the court room applauded, thanking her for opening up and being vulnerable so that those around could get even a glimpse of her struggles. Our CASA youth was kind enough to share her poem with us so that her voice can be heard to the community. CASA was also able to gift her with a brand new bicycle! She was very appreciative and excited to ride her new bike!

Her Poem:

When you're not use to peace, you get anxious about what will happen next because you're so use to the chaos that your past life has given you your whole life. It's almost normal to feel hurt and numb about everything that happens whether good or bad cause everything seems to be a failure in the eyes of people that are suppose to be proud of you, but instead your a problem in their life, so you get beaten by your dad for no reason and your mom was using drugs without you knowing, so you end up in foster care. So you end up wondering who will care about you because your loved ones have shut you out of their life because they believe you're a lost cause and you're meaningless to them but you need to find your own happiness or not you will prove those people right. YOU HAVE TO STAY STRONG BECAUSE THE STORM YOU WILL WALK THROUGH IS GOING TO TRY AND DRAG YOU DOWN BUT YOU HAVE ALWAYS GET UP.

Another one of our CASA kids recently had a fire in his current resource home. Everyone in the home was safe and no harm was done to them, however, most of their belongings were lost in the fire. CASA was able to donate two sizable gift cards to our CASA youth so that he could get new clothes and other supplies that were lost or damaged.

Advocate, Lisette Anaya, was assigned to her 9-year-old CASA kiddo on 07/20/2020. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, Lisette stays connected with her CASA kiddo through Zoom. During their time together Lisette interacts with her CASA kiddo by playing phonic games, practicing words with CVCe words on Jamboard and reading books online. Using words such as lake, rake, bake, cake and set a picture to match the word. The CASA kiddo really enjoys it and asks to do the



“fun” boards every time they meet. Other fun activities are TikTok dances done together. The time passes by so quickly. Lisette is involved in her kiddos academic’s by attending Individualize Educational Plan (IEP) and other school meetings and helping her in Reading and Math. Recently, the CASA kiddo had a change in placement. Lisette made sure to check in with her CASA kiddo, and went to drop off a blanket, school supplies, and other items to help her kiddo with the transition.

Advocate, Gordon Osmus, was assigned to his 14-year-old CASA kiddo on 7/22/2020. Gordon has been involved with his CASA kiddo’s academics since his CASA kiddo is falling behind and is having problems logging in to his classes. Gordon stays connected with his CASA kiddo’s schoolteachers. Gordon is working with the school to get his CASA kiddo additional support and services that will help his kiddo catch up. In this case the parents hold educational rights. Gordon makes sure his CASA kiddo understands there is help available, reminds him of meal pickups, and has a relationship with the teachers.

Advocate, Jessalyn Chamalvide, is assigned to her 16-year-old CASA kiddo. The CASA kiddo has been in resource care since the age of 7 and had a total of 16 placements. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Jessalyn stays connected with her kiddo via telephone, Zoom and by dropping things off at her doorstep. The CASA kiddo loves to express herself through painting. Jessalyn makes sure that her CASA kiddo has the supplies she needs. Jessalyn will drop off art supplies for art projects. The CASA kiddo is grateful and happy to know Jessalyn is there for her. In one occasion the CASA kiddo asked Jessalyn what she was interested in. Jessalyn told her kiddo she absolutely loved sunflowers. The CASA kiddo surprised Jessalyn by painting her in a field of sunflowers. Jessalyn was so happy and surprised. Jessalyn is working on finding an art scholarship for her CASA kiddo.



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on volunteering or becoming a donor:**

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