

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE TEXAS CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM: CASA'S ESSENTIAL ROLE

In the face of the turmoil and uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, CASA of the Sabine Neches Region continues to be a major source of stability for children and families in the Texas child welfare system. The need for CASA advocacy is heightened in this time of stress and crisis. Together, we are amplifying and adapting our work to advocate for the best interest of children and families during the rapid changes faced by the system.

CASA volunteers have swiftly adapted to a virtual model, using videoconferencing to connect with children, participate in the legal process, keep in contact with families, and ensure children's safety and well-being. CASA programs are working collaboratively with CPS and care providers to identify safety issues and other unmet needs for children in state care and find innovative ways to remedy these.

We are dedicated to exceptional advocacy for children and youth, building positive adult connections for them, supporting families as they seek reunification or other permanency outcomes, and finding the best ways to do so while everyone in the system navigates new challenges. Below are the critical issues as we see them, as well as our leadership's response.

THE CRITICAL ISSUES & CASA'S RESPONSIVE ADVOCACY

ISSUE 1: ISOLATION & LACK OF VISITATION

Children in foster care, especially those in congregate care settings, are more isolated than ever before. In-person visitation has largely ceased; school, activities and social events have been cancelled. While virtual visitation can mitigate some of this isolation, families and child advocates are relying on foster parents and treatment staff to facilitate this use of technology, which has proven to be challenging for many.

Response: *CASA supports foster families and treatment staff in the adoption of technology and videoconferencing tools to facilitate virtual visitation. CASA supports providing strong advocacy urging virtual family and sibling visitation access. We are promoting more frequent virtual check-ins with children and families to ensure physical safety and protection, as well as to promote mental well-being.*

ISSUE 2: NEED FOR INCREASED MENTAL & PHYSICAL HEALTH CARE

Children come into the child welfare system having already experienced trauma. The COVID-19 crisis further amplifies stress, fear and uncertainty. This may lead to more mental health challenges, especially if children are not having regular contact with their siblings, parents, advocates, caseworkers, therapists and other people important to the child's sense of well-being. Children and families may need additional support accessing health care, mental health care or substance use disorder treatment, especially if telehealth is the only available option.

Response: *CASA is promoting the use of telehealth services for medical and mental health care. Texas CASA is creating and will release a comprehensive Health Advocacy Guide in the coming months to facilitate access to care in a time of increased stress. This guide will equip volunteers to ensure that children in care are receiving the services through STAR Health that they need and deserve.*

ISSUE 3: DELAYS IN RETURNING CHILDREN TO THEIR FAMILIES & LACK OF ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY

Children and families need additional support to prevent delays in returning children to their families, as courts are delaying or cancelling hearings. Additionally, as hearings and visits move to a virtual format, many low-income families face barriers because they are less likely to have reliable phone service, WiFi and/or computer access.

Response: CASA urges creativity and flexibility related to completion of child and parent service plans as access to services is severely diminished. CASA will advocate for families without digital access to utilize free resources available to get online, such as the Lifeline Cell Phone Program and temporary free internet access programs. CASA will maintain urgency related to permanency, especially reunification.

ISSUE 4: BARRIERS TO EDUCATION ACCESS

Children in foster care already face disproportionate challenges in the education system, and now school is out of session or moved entirely online. The current crisis will likely exacerbate educational challenges and delays in progress, especially for children receiving special education services.

Response: CASA is amplifying educational advocacy, and urges support for children accessing daily school and educational activities online in their foster placements.

ISSUE 5: BARRIERS TO EXTENDED FOSTER CARE FOR OLDER YOUTH

Older youth, particularly 17-year-olds about to exit foster care and young adults who are in extended foster care, are at risk of not meeting the qualifications for extended foster care because schools are closed and finding employment is challenging right now.

Response: CASA supports exemptions and waivers for extended foster care for youth who are interested in staying in the state's care during the current pandemic.



ISSUE 6: POSSIBLE INCREASE IN CHILDREN ENTERING CARE

Research and history have proven that the stress caused by public health crises such as this one will increase the incidence and severity of child abuse and neglect, as well as domestic violence. At the same time, reporting of abuse and neglect declines as teachers and others are not in close contact with children. Many experts predict that even as the physical health crisis slows, there will be a social health crisis: large increase in the number of children and families in crisis due to high rates of unemployment, domestic violence, drug use and other stressors. This will lead to an increase in the number of children entering foster care.

Response: *CASA continues to collaborate with our partners on these critical issues. We continue to raise awareness of child abuse and neglect, the risk factors, protective factors, and signs. We are educating communities about safe ways to assist with prevention of child abuse and neglect and continue to recruit and train volunteers in a virtual format.*

ISSUE 7: NEED FOR MORE KINSHIP & FOSTER CARE PLACEMENTS

As families across Texas lose access to employment and face increased stress, child advocates and providers should expect that kinship placements and foster family recruitment and retention will be extremely difficult, even as the need for more capacity increases.

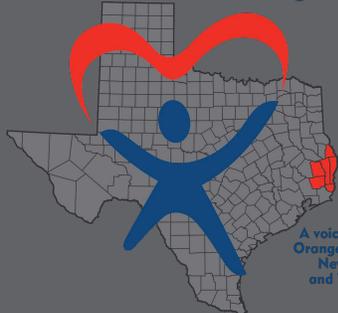
Response: *CASA is amplifying its family engagement and family finding efforts. Additionally, we will launch a faith-based recruitment initiative that aims to educate religious communities about CASA advocacy, the need for more foster families and ways to support current foster families in faith organizations.*

CONCLUSION

Children in foster care are our state's most vulnerable population and CASA's top priority is assuring their safety and well-being. We also need to maintain urgency to reunite children with their families of origin, when this is safe and possible. CASA continues to work toward these goals in collaboration with courts, CPS, care providers, families and other system stakeholders. CASA commends Governor Abbott, the legislature and our judiciary for their leadership, support, innovation and effective response to this crisis. Whatever the future holds, CASA will continue to collaborate to support successful outcomes for children and families in the Texas child welfare system.



CASA
of the Sabine Neches Region



A voice for children in
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