

CASA PROGRAM FUNDAMENTALS

Advocates are appointed by the judge to conduct independent investigation and to monitor Court orders pertaining to the child.

- Advocates are appointed to advocate for the long-term best interest of the child
- Advocates are not mandated by law to “reunite the family” as is the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS)
- Advocates work with the professionals who aim in that direction, but are expected to work in the in the best interest of the child, even in the face of a disagreement with DCFS
- Advocates may agree or disagree with other professionals
- Advocates must have facts to support their recommendation

Best interest of the child may require a recommendation of Termination of Parental Rights

- The decision for termination should be reached only if all other options have been tried and were unsuccessful (or not appropriate for the child), or the parents failed to cooperate with services to correct the conditions of abuse/neglect. The Judge makes the final decision on termination.
- Advocates must deal with their personal feelings regarding the permanent severing of the parent-child relationship and the sadness that may be felt toward the parents
- Advocates must focus on the “best interest” of the child
- Advocates must realize that some children are much better off placed into new families, with new lives
- Advocates strive to make certain that the Judge has all of the facts so that the best possible decision can be made

Advocates keep in regular contact with the child and interested parties on the case

- Regular contact is interpreted to be at least monthly contact, preferably face-to-face, with the child.
- Attorneys, caseworkers, therapists, agency providers, teachers and foster parents need to be contacted in order to keep updated on changes in the child’s situation. This contact should be often enough to build a relationship that will enable the advocate to keep abreast of the child’s situation. Because many cases involve unpredictable activity, regular contact in-person or by phone assumes a smooth flow of information.
- Advocates must be consistent in their contacts. Regular, timely contacts are much more credible and show a truer picture of the case than those contacts made just prior to the hearing

Advocates must understand their limited role

- Meeting the child for a soda at a fast-food restaurant is a good way to provide a “neutral setting” for an older child to discuss feelings, concerns, and accomplishments, and for the advocate to obtain valuable information. Taking the child to the park or for a walk in order to have a relevant, private conversation

is OK. Activities such as movies, shopping, etc. are beyond the scope of the advocate and are not appropriate.

- Advocates are not Big Brothers/Big Sisters, mentors or family friends
- Advocates should not be spending time with the child on recreational outings, except as necessary to their CASA function (advocate, facilitate, investigate, and monitor)
- Advocates need to be careful not to attach themselves to the child emotionally. This can be very hard, but is necessary

Advocates are a persistent presence in a system that can be perceived as frustrating and slow moving.

- Phone calls are not always promptly returned from professionals. Caseworkers have high caseloads, are very busy and do not always have enough time to be thoroughly familiar with a case.
- The Court does not always accept Advocates' recommendations.
- Clients and professionals may become upset with Advocates – disagreements can be expected.
- Clients' parents may not make necessary changes to allow their child to be returned – they fall short of advocate's expectations.
- Often the advocate is the only person who, over time, has full knowledge of a case.
- Advocates need to use that knowledge for the best interest of the child