



The Case for CASA

A National Partnership Model that Makes a Difference for Foster Youth

Featured Story

A movement. That's how National CASA Association's Leah Hausman describes the work her organization does. As national resource development officer for CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates), she knows firsthand the importance of advocacy on behalf of the country's foster youth and the widespread need across our court systems.

Too often, we see stories about children languishing in foster care because their needs are overlooked due to a lack of resources and the limits of an overburdened system.

Children experiencing foster care across the country as a result of abuse, abandonment or neglect face many challenges that significantly impact their ability to create better opportunities for themselves. To help overcome these challenges, national law firms have a unique opportunity to leverage their

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Andrew M. Smulian

talent and resources to help give foster youth a voice in our courtrooms and communities throughout the United States.

National CASA Association: Identifying a Need and Bridging a Gap

It is estimated that nearly 700,000 children experience abuse or neglect every year, and nearly 400,000 are in the foster care system at any given time. Almost a third of foster children lack a volunteer advocate to stand for them in court to ensure they receive the services and support they need to succeed, including a complete education.

The statistics reflect the insurmountable odds that children in foster care face. Only 46 percent of foster youth earn a high school diploma, and only 1 percent earn a bachelor's degree or higher. One in five will become homeless after aging out of the foster care system at 18, and 25 percent will be incarcerated by age 20.

The National CASA Association, in collaboration with nearly 1,000 state and local member programs, supports and promotes court-appointed volunteer advocacy so that every abused or neglected child in foster care can find a safe home, a stable environment, and the opportunity to thrive.

“We see ourselves as filling a need,” says Hausman. “There are so many other people supporting these kids, but often in an inconsistent way – social workers and other child services personnel change often.” She says that CASA provides a one-to-one advocate for each child it serves throughout their foster care experience. “The CASA and GAL [Guardians Ad Litem] volunteers are there step by step with the youth from the moment they are assigned by a judge to when the child finds a permanent home, wherever that may be.”

“Our advocates say, ‘this is what this child needs,’ and work to ensure those needs are met throughout the child’s journey through the foster care system, and often long after they have exited the system,” Hausman says.

” Only 1 percent of foster youth earns a bachelor’s degree or higher

Mimi Quinn, whose CASA advocate entered her life at age 6 and continues to mentor her as she completes her first year of college, says, “I can’t imagine life without my advocate....she’s been with me every step of the way.”

Helping National CASA Achieve its Mission Requires a New Model of Philanthropy

Many conversations around the future of law and “disruption” in the market are focused on innovating client service and the practice of law, but also top of mind is the critical need of advancing new models of philanthropy and social impact.

Akerman is focused on creating new ways to achieve maximum impact across its local communities, moving beyond traditional pro bono legal service to create new models of philanthropy that address specific areas of need in collaboration with community partners and clients.

By designing a more collaborative and focused social impact model, the firm provides its lawyers and staff with opportunities to develop innovative ways to give generously of their time, talent and resources.

” 1/3 of foster children lack an advocate to stand for them and ensure the services and support they need

According to partner Charlie Brumback, who serves as the chair of Akerman’s Philanthropic Council, “Focused, firmwide philanthropic initiatives inspire our people to come together towards achieving a common goal, and when this happens in partnership with our local communities and clients, we succeed in developing truly impactful programs that reflect Akerman’s long-standing culture of giving.”

Akerman’s commitment to advocating for foster children and at-risk youth began with former chairman and CEO Andrew Smulian. “Identifying a need was easy,” he said in a July 2015 interview in *Diversity & The Bar* magazine.

“Around the time we were putting together [Akerman’s firmwide Give Back initiative], the *Miami Herald* did a series about children suffering profound neglect and sometimes dying in foster care and the state’s failed efforts to protect them. Those articles crystallized our decision. For me, on an emotional level, it was a driver to push forward on [this initiative],” Smulian said. “Many kids in the juvenile system are aging out without adequate tools and support – we saw it as imperative to make an impact as early as possible,” according to Brumback.

Education is a Game Changer

At the national level, CASA provides training, volunteer recruitment programs, awareness and advocacy. These efforts are reinforced by partnerships with state organizations and over 900 local programs across the country.

“The CASA/GAL volunteers at the local level, especially those with legal training, are particularly impactful. We know that from the very beginning of a child’s journey through foster care, that our successful intervention hinges on the legal system,” Hausman says.

86,995

CASA volunteers advocating for foster youth across the U.S.

Adding a financial commitment to these efforts completes the circle, with funds applied directly to scholarships to offset the high costs of obtaining a college degree. “Education is a game changer for these youth,” she notes.

The firm’s pledge of \$1 million over the course of five years to National CASA provides much-needed financial assistance in implementing the many programs the organization offers and puts money into the hands of foster children in the form of an endowed college scholarship program. The effects are immediate and far-reaching.

Jackie Robles entered the foster care system when she was six years old, and was fortunate to have a CASA advocate supervise her case in Los Angeles, the largest dependency system in the country. Like Mimi, Jackie is a recipient of an Akerman Academic Excellence Scholarship and is now completing her first year of college. Jackie spoke at the March 2018 National CASA/GAL Conference in Boston.

“My past will not interfere with my future,” she said. “I have that mentality moving forward into college, and that’s what will help me succeed.”

Through a dedicated effort to advance the critical work of National CASA and their legion of trained advocates and guardian ad litem across the country, law firms can and should play an increasingly important role to help create a brighter future for Jackie, Mimi and the thousands of foster children their stories represent.