

**REPORT OF THE DEPARTMENT OF
CRIMINAL JUSTICE SERVICES**

**Report of the Court-Appointed
Special Advocate (CASA)
Program Work Group
(2024 Appropriation Act,
Item 394.B.3.c.)**

**TO THE GOVERNOR AND
THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF VIRGINIA**



HOUSE DOCUMENT NO. 6

**COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA
RICHMOND
2024**



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

Department of Criminal Justice Services

The Honorable Jackson H. Miller
Director

Tracy Louise Winn Banks, Esq.
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October 1, 2024

The Honorable Glenn Youngkin
Governor of Virginia
Patrick Henry Building
1111 East Broad Street
Richmond, Virginia 23219

Members of the Virginia General Assembly
C/O Division of Legislative Automated Systems
(DLAS)
900 East Main Street W528
Richmond, Virginia 23219

Re: Report from the Court-Appointed Special Advocate Work Group

The 2024 Appropriation Act, as enacted by the Virginia General Assembly and the Governor in Chapter 2 during the Special Session (394.B.3.c), directed the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) to convene a work group to study and make recommendations on the feasibility of requiring the establishment of Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) programs in every judicial district in the Commonwealth. DCJS was directed to include various stakeholders on the work group, identify any judicial districts in the Commonwealth where no local CASA program has been established, and to determine the feasibility, including analyzing any obstacles, of requiring the establishment of a local CASA program in every judicial district.

The Act provides that the work group shall complete its work and submit findings and recommendations to the Governor and General Assembly no later than November 1, 2024.

If you have any questions or require additional information, please contact Tracey Jenkins, Division Director, Division of Programs and Services, at tracey.jenkins@dcls.virginia.gov or 804-225-0005.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jackson H. Miller".

Jackson H. Miller
Director

Attachment



Report of the Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Program Work Group

November 1, 2024

Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services
www.dcjs.virginia.gov

Report of the Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Program Work Group

Preface

The 2024 Appropriation Act, as enacted by the Virginia General Assembly and Governor (Chapter 2, Acts of Assembly, 2024 Special Session I), directs the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) to convene a work group to examine the feasibility of requiring the establishment of Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) programs in every judicial district of the Commonwealth of Virginia. (*See Appendix A*)

Work Group Members

CASA Program Coordinator

Melissa O’Neill, *Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services*

Representatives of Local CASA Programs

Kate Duvall
Piedmont CASA

Lorna Rexrode
CASA of Central Virginia

Dionne Harrison
CASA of the New River Valley

Brianna Taylor
28th Judicial District/Culpeper CASA

Jeannine Panzera
Henrico CASA

Kristi Wagner
29th Judicial District CASA

Volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocates

Kassie Gada
CASA of Central Virginia Volunteer

Nicole Poulin (*Also Stakeholder*)
Richmond CASA

Merrily Main
Piedmont CASA Volunteer

Judges in Judicial Districts Where a Local CASA Program is Established

The Honorable David Barredo
16th Judicial Circuit Court

The Honorable Thomas Sotelo
Fairfax J&DR Court

The Honorable Chad Logan
Shenandoah and Page J&DR Court

Judges in Judicial Districts Where No Local CASA Program has been Established

The Honorable Kimberly Athey
Frederick/Winchester J&DR Court

The Honorable Nora Miller
Mecklenburg J&DR Court

The Honorable Jay Dugger*
Hampton J&DR Court

The Honorable Joseph Teefey*
11th District Circuit Court

Virginia Department of Social Services

Shannon Hartung
Virginia Department of Social Services

Ina Fernandez*
Loudoun County Department of Social Services

* Invited and provided input, but not present at meeting

Invited Stakeholders

Morgan Cox
Guardian ad litem

Nicole Poulin (*Also CASA Volunteer*)
Family and Children's Trust Fund

Beth Coyne
Office of the Executive Secretary of the Supreme Court, Court Improvement Program

Eric Reynolds
Office of the Children's Ombudsman

Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services

The Honorable Jackson H. Miller
Director

Melissa O'Neill
CASA Program Coordinator

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Executive Summary

In accordance with the 2024 Appropriation Act, the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) convened a work group focused on identifying any judicial districts in the Commonwealth of Virginia where no local Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program has been established and determining the feasibility, including analyzing any obstacles, of requiring the establishment of a local CASA program in every judicial district. The work group must report its findings and recommendations to the Governor and the General Assembly by November 1, 2024.

The work group convened on July 10, 2024, in Richmond, Virginia. Prior to meeting, the work group was provided with comprehensive written materials, including an overview of CASA program history, current operations, and relevant data to foster a shared understanding of CASA program operations among participants.

There are 27 operational CASA programs in the Commonwealth. Twenty-four are nonprofit organizations, and of those, eight are under an umbrella nonprofit organization which provides other types of services to children, families, and individuals. The remaining 16 programs are stand-alone CASA nonprofit organizations. Three CASA programs are administered by a government agency.

There are 31 judicial districts in the Commonwealth. Of those, 19 are completely served by CASA programs. In eight, some but not all courts are served. There is one judicial district where a local CASA program has been established in only one court. There are three judicial districts where no local CASA program has been established. In total, there are 38 courts without services from a local CASA program.

Led by DCJS staff, the meeting included presentations and discussions aimed at examining the potential for CASA program expansion. Participants identified emergent themes, assessed the need for additional information, and leveraged their diverse experiences to highlight priority areas critical to the expansion of CASA programs in Virginia.

Findings and Recommendations

The work group concluded that requiring the establishment of local CASA programs in every judicial district is not feasible. Further, the group identified obstacles that informed the conclusion in the following areas.

Independence of Program Model: There is a need for flexibility in program implementation to suit local community needs.

Funding Challenges: Adequate financial resources at multiple levels (state, local, and donor) are essential for the sustainability of CASA programs.

The Volunteer-Based Nature of CASA Programs: Adequate number of trained volunteers is crucial for program effectiveness.

Judicial Support: Judicial support is crucial for program effectiveness.

Public Awareness and Education: Addressing misconceptions about CASA programs will improve community engagement and support.

Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Program Expansion Study Work Group Report

Introduction

Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) programs provide trained, citizen volunteers to speak for abused and neglected children who are the subject of juvenile court proceedings involving allegations of abuse and neglect. CASA volunteers advocate for safe, permanent homes for children and provide a consistent presence and a voice in court for children, helping to ensure the best possible outcome for child victims.

Virginia's CASA Program is established pursuant to Article 5, Chapter 1, of Title 9.1 of the *Code of Virginia* and administered by the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS). The program, working with local programs also established pursuant to this article, provides "...services in accordance with this article to children who are subjects of judicial proceedings (i) involving allegations that the child is abused, neglected, in need of services, or in need of supervision or (ii) for the restoration of parental rights pursuant to § 16.1-283.2 and for whom the juvenile and domestic relations district court judge determines such services are appropriate. CASA volunteer appointments may continue for youth 18 years of age and older who are in foster care if the court has retained jurisdiction pursuant to subsection Z of § 16.1-241 or § 16.1-242 and the juvenile and domestic relations district court judge determines such services are appropriate."

DCJS promulgates regulations for local CASA programs in accordance with the *Code of Virginia* and monitors local programs for compliance. Regulations for local programs, codified in 6VAC20-160-10 through 6VAC-160-120, include the following topic areas: general definitions, program administration, volunteer administration, qualifications of volunteers, and training guidelines for volunteers. State general funding available through the Appropriation Act is also administered by DCJS to applicants seeking to establish and operate a local CASA program in their respective judicial districts. Only local programs operating in accordance with Article 5, Chapter 1, of Title 9.1 of the *Code of Virginia* are eligible to receive state funds.

CASA volunteers provide independent, unbiased information to the court regarding the best interest of the child. Local CASA programs are locally operated organizations (most are nonprofits), governed by a board of directors or a local unit of government. Each must raise the funds required to operate the program to supplement the grant funds provided by DCJS. DCJS grant funds make up only 36% of the annual aggregate statewide CASA budget. CASA programs are generally considered grassroots organizations, supported by local communities.

There are 27 operational CASA programs in the Commonwealth. Twenty-four are nonprofit organizations, and of those, eight are under an umbrella nonprofit organization which provides other types of services to children, families, and individuals. The remaining 16 programs are stand-alone CASA nonprofit organizations. Three CASA programs are administered by a government agency. Program budgets in FY23 ranged from \$75,000 to \$991,726, with a median budget of \$205,700 and an average of \$314,616.

There are 31 judicial districts in the Commonwealth. Of those, 19 are completely served by CASA programs. In eight, some but not all courts are served. There is one judicial district where a local CASA program has been established in only one of its courts. There are three judicial districts where no local

CASA program has been established. In total, there are 38 courts without services from a local CASA program.

CASA programs range in scope and size depending on the number of courts and localities served. In FY23, nine programs served up to 60 children, seven programs served up to 120 children, six programs served up to 180 children, and five programs served over 180 children. A total of 116 people were employed in the 27 programs statewide in FY23. The average staff size is four employees. Average salaries for full-time Executive Directors, Program Directors, and Volunteer Coordinators were \$74,683, \$59,040, and \$49,180, respectively.

DCJS maintains a website with CASA information:

www.dcjv.virginia.gov/juvenile-services/programs/court-appointed-special-advocate-program-casa.

Work Group Charge and Purpose

The charge and purpose from the General Assembly for the work group is “to study and make recommendations on requiring a local court-appointed special advocate (CASA) program to be established and available in every judicial district of the Commonwealth.” Further, the work group is “to identify any judicial districts in the Commonwealth where no local CASA program has been established and determine the feasibility, including analyzing any obstacles, of requiring the establishment of a local CASA program in every judicial district.”

The 2024 Appropriation Act as enacted by the Virginia General Assembly and Governor (Chapter 2, Acts of Assembly, 2024 Special Session I) may be found in Appendix A in this report. Pursuant to this directive, DCJS included membership for the work group as required.

Methodology

DCJS engaged in several activities prior to the workgroup meeting to assist in accomplishing the charge and purpose.

DCJS developed surveys for Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court Judges (Appendix B) and CASA Program Directors (Appendix C) about the feasibility of CASA program expansion to every judicial district in the Commonwealth. The Office of the Executive Secretary of the Supreme Court of Virginia emailed the judicial survey to every juvenile court judge; the CASA Program Coordinator at DCJS emailed the survey to local CASA programs.

To benefit from lessons learned, DCJS facilitated three local CASA program focus groups centered on the feasibility, benefits, challenges, and obstacles of the proposed mandate to establish a local CASA Program in every judicial district of the Commonwealth. Participants were selected based on their past or current experience in program expansion into multiple jurisdictions (Appendix D).

Finally, DCJS developed a report identifying every judicial district in the Commonwealth where CASA program services are available. In an effort to present a complete picture of need, the report included data on judicial districts without CASA programs and judicial districts with CASA programs where existing programs do not have sufficient resources to serve all the children in need of CASA services. These areas are deemed to be “underserved” (Appendix E). DCJS used the number of abuse and neglect filings from the Office of the Supreme Court as a proxy for children who are eligible for CASA.

Work group members received the following materials in advance of the meeting for their review:

- Copy of CASA enabling legislation, Article 5 of Chapter 1 of Title 9.1, *Code of Virginia*
- CASA Program Overview
- FY23 CASA Program Report
- Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court Judges Survey Report
- Local CASA Program Survey Report
- Local CASA Program Focus Group Report
- Need by Judicial District Report

DCJS staff led the work group in a comprehensive overview of CASA program history and a summary of current program operations, including a review of materials sent in advance, to create a shared understanding of CASA program operations in Virginia (see Appendix F).

The work group was divided into smaller groups for discussion purposes. Participants examined emergent themes, determined if additional information was needed, and based upon their respective experiences and expertise, identified priority areas having the greatest impact on CASA program expansion in Virginia.

The full work group reconvened to make an overarching recommendation and identify obstacles for the feasibility of requiring establishment of a local CASA program in every judicial district in the Commonwealth.

Work Group Recommendation on Requiring a Local CASA Program to be Established and Available in Every Judicial District of the Commonwealth

The work group concluded that it is not feasible to require the establishment of local CASA programs in every judicial district in the Commonwealth. They identified obstacles that informed the conclusion in several key areas and offered specific suggestions for each identified obstacle to enhance the overall capacity and infrastructure of local CASA programs in the Commonwealth. The areas were as follows: independence of the program model; funding challenges; the volunteer-based nature of CASA programs; judicial support; and public awareness and education.

Obstacle 1: Independence of the CASA Program Model

While CASA programs provide a service *to* the court, CASA programs in Virginia are independent entities *from* the court. CASA programs are either nonprofit entities or local government agencies, not directly under the court. This is a critical component of CASA programs. CASA volunteers provide independent, unbiased, factual information to the court regarding the best interest of the child.

Work Group Suggestions

- Rather than a mandate, build capacity and support for existing local programs focusing on underserved courts.
- Develop strategies to explore sustainable funding for CASA programs statewide, then consider expansion plans.
- Frame the benefit of the CASA program in child-centric terms when educating judges.

Obstacle 2: Funding

Currently, operations of existing CASA programs are not fully funded. CASA programs receive 36% of their annual funding from DCJS through a grant which is a combination of state general funds and federal Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) funds. The remaining 64% of funds are raised by local CASA governing authorities and CASA program staff. Federal VOCA funds are at risk of reduction given severe cuts to the VOCA fund nationwide. Sources of private, corporate, and business grant funding is also diminishing. Localities need to support existing communities before consideration of expansion.

The allocation of state general fund dollars has not increased since 2008. The current funding formula by which grant amounts are determined, which includes a base amount of funds which serves up to 60 children and then an additional per child allocation for each child served over 60, was established by DCJS in 2007. It does not take account for the cost to sustain program expansions (i.e., real costs of serving multiple jurisdictions, larger geographic areas, and actual costs involved in program implementation across multiple courts). Due to the stagnant state general fund allocation, each new program established or new area served reduces the amount of funds that existing programs receive from DCJS.

There are significantly more children eligible for CASA services in localities served by CASA but without sufficient resources to meet the need (*underserved areas*) than in *unserved* areas. In CY2023, existing CASA programs were unable to serve children who were the subject of an estimated 3,403 abuse and neglect filings in underserved areas. In contrast, there were 329 abuse and neglect filings in unserved areas. Volunteer recruitment at state and local levels, program staffing support, and training resources were all identified as capacity needs for existing local programs. The work group emphasized the importance of strengthening infrastructure and capacity at both the local CASA program and state level before considering expansion to unserved areas.

Work Group Suggestions

- DCJS should revisit the CASA program funding formula.
- Increase the state general fund allocation for CASA programs; there has not been an increase since 2008.
- Create an ongoing funding strategy to provide incentives for expansion and which allows additional funding to supplement existing funding so existing programs and localities are not hurt by bringing on more localities, like, for example:
 - Exploring sources of ongoing support for CASA programs including court fees, Interest on Lawyers' Trust Accounts (IOLTA), or Lottery funding.
 - Seeking to fund a statewide endowment for CASA programs.

Obstacle #3: The Volunteer-Based Nature of CASA Programs

The success of the CASA model is dependent upon the trained citizen volunteer advocate, assigned by a juvenile court judge to an individual child's case. By definition, volunteers cannot be required or mandated to serve. Existing CASA programs struggle to recruit enough volunteers to meet the needs of courts served. The work group noted this as a significant obstacle to requiring CASA programs statewide.

Support for volunteer recruitment is a significant need across the Commonwealth. Finding diverse volunteers is a major challenge statewide. DCJS funded a statewide volunteer recruitment campaign in 2022 in collaboration with the Virginia CASA network using American Rescue Plan Act funding. The campaign was excellent; however, ongoing funding is needed to sustain the gains made. Ongoing public awareness and recruitment is necessary to grow and maintain the volunteer base to meet the need

statewide. Further focus on infrastructure and capacity building at the local CASA program and state level is required to meet this need.

According to a [research summary](#) by AmeriCorps, volunteerism declined by 7% in the United States during the COVID pandemic.¹ That was not the case with CASA volunteers. CASA volunteer retention in Virginia remained steady over the past five years. The stability of retention rates is attributed to the screening methods, training, supervision, and support provided by local CASA programs, which is in part driven by the regulations promulgated by DCJS. However, the need for additional CASA volunteers is great. Finding a more diverse volunteer base is needed to expand the broader pool of volunteers to serve Virginia's abused and neglected children.

Work Group Suggestions

- Provide support to local programs for recruitment, training, supervision, and retention of CASA volunteers.
- Allocate additional state resources in these vital areas of support to local programs.
- Specific recruitment suggestions:
 - Consider recruiting volunteers at events that solicit volunteers for other types of child serving opportunities (i.e., foster parents, mentoring).
 - Integrate recruitment efforts with other community organizations (e.g., churches, civic organizations).
 - Recruit volunteers from law schools in Virginia.

Obstacle #4: Judicial Support

Judicial support is required to establish a CASA program. Judge David Soukup founded the CASA program in 1977 in Seattle, Washington after observing in his court that the social services and legal systems were overburdened. He wanted more unbiased information on the children and families coming before him in order to inform the significant decisions that he made as a judge when children were before him with allegations of abuse and neglect. His idea was to engage and train community volunteers to fill in the gaps and support the overburdened system to provide the bench with the needed information to make those critical decisions

In Virginia, Judge Phillip Trompeter was a newly appointed juvenile court judge in Roanoke when he heard about the CASA program while at a conference in Reno, Nevada. Believing that CASA volunteers would make a tremendous difference in the cases before the court, Judge Trompeter helped shepherd the first CASA program into existence in 1985. Norfolk and Newport News courts soon followed, and thus began the CASA program movement in Virginia.

In 1990, the General Assembly passed legislation establishing the CASA program and directing DCJS to promulgate regulations for local CASA programs. At that time, there were 11 operational CASA programs in the Commonwealth. Today there are 27 operational CASA programs serving, at least in part, 28 of 31 judicial districts and 91 of 133 localities in Virginia.

The National CASA/GAL Association was founded in 1982 and provides technical assistance and support to local CASA programs. The CASA concept is endorsed by the American Bar Association and the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. In 2022, there were over 900 CASA/GAL

¹ <https://americorps.gov/sites/default/files/document/volunteering-civic-life-america-research-summary.pdf>

programs across the country, with nearly 88,000 volunteers advocating for 227,000 abused and neglected children.

Most juvenile and domestic relations district courts (67%) in Virginia have an established CASA program. According to the judicial survey conducted for this study, juvenile court judges with CASA programs recognize the value of the CASA program and specifically, find benefit in the information provided to the court by the CASA volunteer on behalf of the child. Judges valued the objectivity of the report and the unbiased recommendations offered and expressed appreciation for the support provided to the child and family by the CASA volunteer.

Judges have discretion when deciding to appoint CASA volunteers. Judges also have discretion when deciding to support the development of a new CASA program. Without judicial support, a CASA program cannot fulfill its mission and thus has no purpose.

Many of Virginia's 27 local CASA programs were started at the request of judges. Information provided to the work group indicated that while most juvenile court judges in the state are supportive of and endorse the CASA program, there are some judges that do not. These judges do not see the value added by the program and express satisfaction with the stakeholders and partners working on behalf of the abused and neglected children in their court. They do not see the need for a CASA program given that their systems are functioning. These judges believe that, for their courts, a CASA program would be a disruption and not a benefit. On the other hand, there are judges that do not have access to CASA program services and are very interested in the development of a program in their respective courts.

The work group noted a significant obstacle to requiring local CASA program expansion is where judicial support does not exist. A mandate impedes judicial discretion, and for those courts that are not supportive of the concept, the program would not be welcomed. A mandate also does not allow for the locality to determine its own best practices, including the development of a CASA program.

Work Group Suggestions

- Develop model protocol for judicial evaluation of CASA reports.
- Develop education and training for judges that emphasizes the benefits of the CASA program, specifically the benefits to the child. Include information during the training on children and families who have received CASA program services.
- Develop education and training to enhance CASA program partnerships with guardians ad litem (GALs) and local bar associations.

Obstacle 5: Public Awareness and Misperceptions of the CASA Program

It became evident in the preparation for and conversation at the work group meeting that not all stakeholders are familiar with CASA, and that some misperceptions exist. The importance of educating stakeholders, partners, and the public on the role and operations of CASA programs and CASA volunteers was evident during the work group discussion. The various partners and stakeholders with whom CASA programs routinely interface include juvenile and domestic relations district court judges, local departments of social services, guardians ad litem, court personnel, parent attorneys, mental health providers, school personnel, local government officials, the media, and various community funders.

The work group discussed several areas where there are notable *misperceptions* of the CASA program and CASA volunteers.

Misperception 1: Being a CASA volunteer takes a great deal of time, so you cannot be a volunteer and work full time.

Reality: Representatives on the work group offered unique perspectives on the time requirements for volunteering. The time commitment varies, but it is not as burdensome as it seems. CASA volunteers typically only take one case at a time, and the monthly time commitment fluctuates depending on the status of the case. CASA volunteers come from all walks of life and are genuinely interested in finding solutions to complex problems. Most work part- or full-time and still can meet the requirements as a CASA volunteer.

Misperception 2: CASA volunteers are not appropriately trained.

Reality: In 6VAC20-160-120, the CASA regulations set forth requirements for CASA volunteer training. These regulations require a minimum of 30 hours of pre-service training and provide instruction on the topics that must be included in the pre-service training. As a part of that training, volunteers learn how to interview children and stakeholders and write a comprehensive, objective, unbiased court report. The training for CASA volunteers is trauma informed and focuses on the importance of family preservation and maintaining family connections.

Further, volunteers must have 12 hours of continuing education annually. CASA programs are required to provide volunteers with training opportunities designed to improve the volunteer's level of knowledge and skill with special attention to changes in the law, policies, and practices of other agencies involved or any developments in the understanding of child development, child abuse and neglect, and child advocacy.

Most programs in Virginia require more than the minimum number of hours. In addition to the training, preservice requirements include court observation of cases like those that the volunteer will be assigned.

Misperception 3: Local programs receive no oversight or guidance.

Reality: Local CASA programs have oversight from numerous outside entities. DCJS has regulatory and administrative oversight of Virginia CASA programs. Programs that are nonprofit organizations must comply with state and federal requirements regarding their nonprofit status, including having oversight by their governing boards, and the three programs under local government supervision have additional requirements by local units of government. As members of the national CASA organization, all programs must meet standard requirements. For fundraising purposes, each must meet the state fundraising requirements with the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. All programs must meet requirements regarding financial accounting and local business practices. If there are regulatory concerns, local programs are accountable to DCJS.

Misperception 4: CASA reports are inadmissible because they contain hearsay.

Reality: The work group discussed the importance of demystifying CASA's role in judicial decision making. The Virginia Court of Appeals held in [Holley v. Amherst County Department of Social Services](#) that CASA reports are admissible, and the [Code of Virginia § 16.1-274\(A\)](#) sets forth requirements for the filing and distribution of CASA reports to attorneys for the parties in advance of all hearings.

These misperceptions can be clarified and perhaps eliminated through intentional training of stakeholders, including training on the role of the CASA volunteer.

Work Group Suggestions

- Emphasize the benefits for the child, as well as the value of information provided to the court, when training judges on the CASA program.
- DCJS and the Virginia Department of Social Services should work together to develop a best practices protocol for establishing guidelines for local departments of social services and local CASA program collaborative partnerships.
- Develop creative strategies for education of guardians ad litem (GAL) on the role of CASA volunteers and the collaborative relationship with GALs. Working with GALs is critical for CASA volunteers. This is the only defined partnership for CASA volunteers in the *Code of Virginia*. A major concern identified by the work group is the decline in the available number of GALs to serve across Virginia. Therefore, the partnership between CASA volunteers and GALs is even more critical. The work group suggested exploring strategies for improving education of GALs on the role of CASA volunteers and GALs.
- Explore partnerships between local CASA programs and local bar associations.
- Develop a comprehensive public awareness program for stakeholders on the CASA program including training, supervision, and CASA program management and oversight.
- Educate stakeholders on the current content of CASA training to alleviate misconceptions and mistrust as the training has significantly evolved from when the program began.

Other Obstacles:

The work group identified several other obstacles for statewide expansion. The remaining courts to be served in the state are mostly in rural localities and will likely benefit from existing CASA program expansion rather than development of a new CASA program. Multi-jurisdictional CASA programs experience unique challenges when working in multiple localities. The expansive geography, distinct cultural and social communities within jurisdictions, funding challenges, and small numbers of children to be served all present unique challenges.

The process for CASA program expansion typically takes approximately two years to complete. The process is driven by a locality, and there are many steps necessary to fully execute new program development.

Since CASA programs are locally operated, most often by a nonprofit organization, with oversight provided by a board or administrative authority, the oversight authority must approve any expansion project. If there is not an existing CASA program in place, a new program structure must be developed.

CASA programs are regulated by DCJS and are also members of the National CASA/GAL Association. As such, they must comply with Virginia regulations, DCJS grant conditions for funding purposes, and National CASA/GAL standards for local programs. When considering program expansion or new program development into an unserved area, DCJS can provide instruction as to what is required by the CASA program staff and governing board authority to meet the various requirements.

DCJS works collaboratively with the local program staff or constituent planning group to complete the steps required to establish an expansion or new program development project, providing technical assistance and support as needed. When resources are available, DCJS provides grant funding for expansion and new program development. Finally, DCJS ensures the program expansion meets regulatory requirements for operations.

Work Group Suggestions

- Develop an expansion project “playbook” or tool kit for Virginia CASA program expansion efforts.

Conclusion

The work group's comprehensive analysis and recommendations aim to enhance the capacity and infrastructure of local CASA programs throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia. While the establishment of mandatory programs in every judicial district may not be feasible, the suggestions provide a roadmap for strategic improvements that will bolster the effectiveness of CASA initiatives in Virginia.

Appendices

Please contact Melissa O’Neill, *CASA Program Coordinator*, at melissa.o’neill@dcjs.virginia.gov or 804-293-0473 if interested in receiving the complete appendix materials.

Appendix A: Legislative Mandate

Chapter 2, Acts of Assembly, 2024 Special Session I, (394.B.3.c): The Department of Criminal Justice Services (the Department) shall convene a work group to study and make recommendations on requiring a local court-appointed special advocate (CASA) program to be established and available in every judicial district of the Commonwealth. The work group shall include the CASA Program Coordinator, representatives of at least two local CASA programs, at least two volunteer court-appointed special advocates, at least two judges of a juvenile and domestic relations district court and one judge of a circuit court sitting in a judicial district where a local CASA program is established, at least two judges of a juvenile and domestic relations district court and one judge of a circuit court sitting in a judicial district where no local CASA program has been established, a representative from the Department of Social Services, and any other stakeholders deemed appropriate by the Department. The work group shall identify any judicial districts in the Commonwealth where no local CASA program has been established and determine the feasibility, including analyzing any obstacles, of requiring the establishment of a local CASA program in every judicial district. The work group shall report its findings and recommendations to the Governor and the General Assembly by November 1, 2024.

Appendix B: Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court Judges Survey Report

In preparation for the work group meeting, Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) developed a survey for Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court Judges about the possibility of a CASA program expansion to every judicial district in the Commonwealth. The Office of the Executive Secretary of the Supreme Court of Virginia emailed the survey to every juvenile court judge; responses were received from 56 judges (39%), 47 with CASA programs and nine without.

Appendix C: Local CASA Program Survey Report

DCJS surveyed CASA Program Directors in May 2024 about the possibility of a CASA program expansion in every judicial district in the Commonwealth. Responses were received from 26 of 27 programs directors (96%).

Appendix D: Local CASA Program Focus Group Report

DCJS facilitated three local CASA program focus groups centered on the feasibility, benefits, challenges, and obstacles of the proposed mandate to establish a local CASA Program in every judicial district of the Commonwealth. The participants were selected to participate in the focus group based on their past or current experience in program expansion into multiple jurisdictions.

Appendix E: Need by Judicial District Report

Developed for this study, the report identifies every judicial district in the Commonwealth and where CASA program services are available. Additional data is included on the estimated number of underserved and unserved children in judicial districts.

Appendix F: Work Group Presentation

DCJS developed a presentation for the meeting which included a CASA program overview, requirements for CASA program development and sustainability, and CASA program data. The work group then reviewed the materials sent in advance. Finally, the presentation contained an approximation of the additional costs needed for potential expansion.

