

Evaluating Child Advocacy in Cuyahoga County: CASA and GAL Programs

Wendy Regoeczi, Ph.D.¹, Meghan Salas Atwell, Ph.D.², Rob Fischer Ph.D.², Michael Henderson, Ph.D.², Stephen Steh, M.A.² & Elsie Day, Esq.³

This brief reports on phase two of a process and outcome evaluation of the CASA program in Cuyahoga County. The goals of the process evaluation were to assess perceptions among the CASA volunteers and coordinators, magistrates, and family members about CASA and GAL services; to compare attorney GAL and CASA reports; and to observe court hearings. The outcome evaluation is based on the use of a random assignment procedure between March 2016 and December 2017. Researchers compared those cases assigned standard attorney GAL-only services to those cases assigned both a CASA volunteer and attorney-GAL services. Outcomes related to court occurrences, new reports of abuse/neglect, and within-group services received among the treatment group were explored. This report was made possible through support from The Cleveland Foundation and The George Gund Foundation.

BACKGROUND

Child and Family Advocates of Cuyahoga County (CFACC) was formed as a non-profit agency in 2016 to bring together the 38-year old Cleveland Metropolitan Bar Association's GAL Project and the Cuyahoga County Juvenile Court's recently established CASA of Cuyahoga County program. Its mission is to make a difference for every child served through advocacy, education, and collaborative alliances.

Staff of CFACC recruit, train, and assist attorneys and community volunteers to serve as GAL and CASA who are responsible for investigation, facilitation, advocacy and monitoring of cases. Generally, no more than two cases are assigned to a CASA volunteer at a time, while attorney GAL have no limit to the number of cases assigned at a given time. Since the first case assignments in 2016, a limited number of CASA volunteers serve

in conjunction with a GAL, resulting in the majority of cases having only a GAL assigned. In 2018, there were 3780 attorney GAL assignments and 116 CASA assignments to abuse, neglect, and dependency cases.

PROCESS EVALUATION

Family Interviews -Attempts were made to contact 48 family members of cases involving a CASA volunteer; ultimately eight interviews were completed. Family members reported extensive interactions with CASA volunteers and that CASA volunteers took the time to listen to their concerns and answer questions. CASA volunteers were viewed to represent everybody's interests and were reported to be easier to access and more available than other parties on the case. Respondents reported attorney GALs were helpful in providing information about the court process. The frequency of contact with attorney GALs varied significantly, with some reporting virtually no contact and a few describing extensive interaction. Several reported confusion about which person was the CASA volunteer

¹ Cleveland State University, Criminology Research Center; ² Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development, Jack, Joseph, and Morton Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences, Case Western Reserve University; ³ Consultant



and which was the attorney GAL.

Review of CASA and GAL Reports - A review of a random sample of 12 CASA volunteer and attorney GAL reports from 2018 from the same cases revealed that CASA reports adhere to standard structure and format and GAL reports do not. The average length of CASA reports are 4.8 pages compared to 2.4 pages for GAL reports. CASA reports document an average of 6.7 visits per reporting period, with several noting double-digit numbers of visits. GAL reports document an average of 1.5 visits per reporting period. Only one GAL report documented more than 2 visits to a case. One half of the GAL reports provided no information on the number of family visits conducted by GAL.

Court Observations - Observations of cases at Juvenile Court between November 2017 and August 2018 across four different magistrates' courtrooms revealed considerable variability in the incorporation of CASAs into the hearing. Magistrates vary in terms of whether they ask the CASA volunteer any questions during the hearing, whether the CASA volunteer is asked to provide recommendations, whether they make reference to the CASA volunteer's report, and whether they ask about their availability when scheduling further hearings. Some parties had not read the CASA's report prior to the hearing. CASA volunteers lack a consistent location to sit in the courtroom.

Interviews with CASA Volunteers, Volunteer Coordinators, and Juvenile Court Magistrates - Interviews were conducted with all three CASA volunteer coordinators, six CASA volunteers and four magistrates. Many benefits to having CASA volunteers assigned to cases were identified, including having much more time to be directly involved in the case, to develop rapport with the family, to investigate, and to turn up information critical to the case. Variability exists in extent to which CASA volunteers have been able to develop collaborative relationships with attorney GALs.

⁴*Due to unforeseen shortages in available CASA volunteers starting on September 21, 2016, not all families assigned to the treatment were assigned a CASA volunteer. New cases were assigned a CASA volunteer if one was available at the time of assignment. To ensure research design fidelity, children assigned during the initial period in which volunteers were available for all treatment cases (3/31/16-9/20/16) (cohort 1) are evaluated separately from those assigned during the 9/21/16-12/31/17 period (cohort 2).*

Concerns were raised over a lack of visits with family conducted by attorney GALs and the timeliness of GAL report submissions. Consideration given to CASA volunteer's recommendations was reported to vary considerably across courtrooms. Several magistrates indicated that the CASA volunteer's role in the courtroom is unclear. CASA reports were described as very detailed with recommendations clearly supported by facts and information. Concerns were noted regarding the pay and workload of attorney GALs.

OUTCOME EVALUATION

The outcome evaluation used an experimental design wherein cases were assigned by lottery to receive either (a) standard attorney GAL-only services or (b) attorney GAL and CASA volunteer services together. The following research questions were addressed:

-Are there any differences between families served by a CASA volunteer and those not served by a CASA volunteer with respect to court occurrences?

-Are families served by a CASA volunteer less likely to have a new report of abuse/neglect with the DCFS than families not served by a CASA volunteer?

-For those cases resulting in DCFS placement, are there any differences in the number of placement days and discharge and end reasons between families served by a CASA volunteer and those not served by a CASA volunteer?

-Within the treatment group are there any within-group differences with respect to the nature of the service received?

Sample and Method - During the study period beginning 3/31/16, cases had an equal chance to receive either the treatment assignment, consisting of an attorney GAL along with a CASA volunteer, or the control assignment of an attorney GAL only. These groups form the basis for measuring outcomes over time. At assignment, all cases had been designated COPS (Court-Ordered Protective Supervision), wherein DCFS has not taken custody of the child but there is ongoing concern about the child's safety.⁴

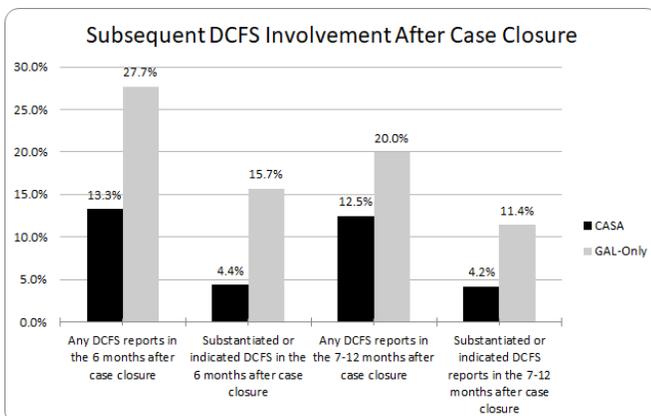
Results - Among the short-term outcomes that could be observed. The following patterns emerged:

-Within the cohort 1 sample, the only statistically significant difference was the share of cases with a “sole custody” determination (usually to the mother favoring the CASA/GAL group.

-Among the entire sample (cohorts 1 & 2), a few differences did emerge between groups, namely:

- CASA/GAL cases were more likely to have a "neglected" finding than control group cases.
- CASA/GAL cases were more likely to have custody awarded, a “sole custody” determination, and protective supervision terminated than control cases.
- Differences remained when models controlled for family size to account for potential bias introduced in the cohort 2 sample.

Longer-term outcomes associated with recidivism to DCFS are preliminary but promising (See Figure). A consistent pattern emerged that the likelihood of a new DCFS report is lower among the treatment group than the control group and the likelihood of a new report declines slightly over time for both groups. The differences are not statistically significant at conventional levels, but the pattern is consistent across incident type and over time.



Data Sources: Cuyahoga County Department of Child and Family Services; CASA Program Records

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Changes are recommended below to improve this approach so it can be fully assessed alongside other service designs.

Standards and guidelines for attorney GAL and CASA volunteers

- Require attorney GAL to meet with the child more frequently.
- Require attendance of attorney GAL and/or CASA volunteers at DCFS case reviews.
- Establish a common report template for attorney GAL and CASA volunteers.
- Limit the number of cases an attorney GAL can have at any given time.

Programmatic

- Incorporate more role playing/hands-on experiences, information on the legal system, DCFS processes, collaboration, and service planning in training.
- Limit attendance of volunteer coordinators at hearings.
- Increase payment to attorney GAL.
- Reimburse CASA volunteers for mileage and parking.
- Establish a consistent location for attorney GAL and CASA volunteers in the courtroom.
- Provide information on the roles and responsibilities of attorney GAL and CASA volunteers.
- Collect consistent, essential data on attorney GAL and CASA volunteers that allows for quality control and assessment of services.
- Conduct monthly meetings that allow attorney GAL and CASA volunteers to discuss their experiences and support/learn from each other.
- Sponsor an annual meeting to recognize outstanding work of attorney GAL, CASA volunteers, DCFS workers, jurists, prosecutors, etc.
- Recruit additional attorney GAL and CASA volunteers that embrace the enhanced service model.

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JACK, JOSEPH AND MORTON MANDEL
SCHOOL OF APPLIED SOCIAL SCIENCES

CASE WESTERN RESERVE
UNIVERSITY

Center on Urban Poverty and
Community Development
11402 Bellflower Road
Cleveland, Ohio 44106-7167



povertycenter.case.edu



216.368.6946



povcenter@case.edu



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