

November 1998

Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children in Washington State: A Review of Effectiveness EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 1997 session of the Washington State Legislature funded an evaluation of court-appointed special advocates/guardians ad litem (CASA/GALs). Volunteer CASA advocates operate in 22 of the state's 32 court jurisdictions, investigating and representing the dependent child's perspective in family court. The evaluation was to determine the effectiveness of the CASA/GAL program in improving outcomes for dependent children, and to examine cost effectiveness.

The Office of Crime Victim's Advocacy and the Washington State Institute for Public Policy collaborated on project management, contracting with Lucy Berliner from the Harborview Center for Sexual Assault and Traumatic Stress as the research investigator.

First, the study limitations must be clarified. Since the legislative appropriation was relatively modest (\$30,000), the research could not follow individual cases through the child protection and court system. Studies of this nature have been conducted elsewhere in the nation, relying on budgets of several hundred thousand dollars. Even with generous budgets, researchers have faced great difficulties in measuring effectiveness through this research design. In many instances, CASA/GAL programs rightly prioritize the most serious and difficult cases, as well as younger children, thus the outcomes for these children cannot fairly be compared to older children in more benign circumstances.

It was possible, however, to assess program effectiveness by surveying persons who are knowledgeable about the program. This approach offers reliable, systematic information at a comparatively modest cost.

The research team reached the following conclusions:

- CASA/GAL programs in the state are *fulfilling their mandate*. The programs and their volunteers are consistently conducting investigations and monitoring cases in the manner that is expected.
- CASA/GAL programs enjoy widespread support. Professionals who interact regularly with CASA/GALs find that volunteers contribute an *independent and valuable perspective* on behalf of children during the case investigation phase. Respondents overwhelmingly prefer that a case have a CASA/GAL and they favor volunteers over paid GALs.
- On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 defined as outstanding, the *average ranking* of CASA programs by community professionals is 7.9.
- CASA/GAL volunteers report that their experiences of helping children reunite with families or finding alternative permanent homes are *extremely rewarding* and that the programs provide them with *sufficient training and support*.

The programs are a *relatively inexpensive* method of providing representation to dependent children. It costs an average of \$500 per case served each year. Most funds are provided by the county where the program resides; the state has funded an enhanced recruitment effort in three counties.