

## **UNIT I**

### **INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW**

The United States is becoming an increasingly diverse society: the 2000 census shows that communities of color have made significant increases and combined comprises approximately 30% of the population. Diversity is becoming increasingly important in all walks of life - our communities, our schools, our places of worship, government, business and of course the human service sector.

CASA programs have a special responsibility to be concerned with diversity and its attendant related issues. CASA prides itself on being a “voice for children” within institutions that often are not set up to hear those voices. CASA works with the courts, social service departments, foster care programs and a myriad of other public and private agencies. It is easy to overlook a child’s quiet voice in what are often cavernous halls.

In providing a voice for children, CASA programs must ask themselves how does this voice really sound. Does it have an accent typical of Puerto Rico, Mexico or another Caribbean or Central American country? Does it speak with the cadence of urban youth rapping on a street corner? Does it have to translate for parents and other relatives from Vietnam, China or elsewhere? Does it have the pace and inflection of a child living in often obscure rural poverty?

To provide a true voice for children, CASA must be able to listen to the language of children that each program services, understand the idioms and intonations, understand the unspoken body languages. In order to do this, CASA programs must take up diversity at every level - its Board, its Advisory Committee, its staff and of course its volunteers. All these pieces are interconnected.

This manual is intended to help CASA programs improve their diversity at all of the various organizational and programmatic levels. It grows out of the experience of the Center for Community Alternatives (CCA), a private, not-for-profit agency that serves as the umbrella organization for the Syracuse/Onondaga County, New York CASA program. As an organization whose mission and program brings it into contact with very disempowered and impoverished communities, through our work with people in the criminal and juvenile justice system, people with HIV and AIDS and high risk youth, we have come to understand the importance and value of having a diverse board and staff at all levels. We brought this passion and commitment to the local CASA program, that had as its founding committee (and subsequent Advisory Board), very committed and civic minded individuals, but no representation from either the African American or Latino communities, from which most of the children in foster care come.

One of our first tasks was to increase diversity on the Advisory Board itself. To their

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credit the founding members readily recognized the importance of bringing diverse perspectives to the Advisory Board. Within two months, the Advisory Board went from having no representation from communities of color to having 38% percent participation.

Recognizing that diversity efforts needed to be directed to recruiting volunteers from communities of color, CCA applied for and received a 1999 Demonstration Grant from the National CASA organization. As part of the grant, we set specific goals and objectives to increase the number of volunteers from communities of color. This manual reflects our experience in achieving our program objectives. In 1999 the Syracuse/Onondaga CASA program had only 11% percent of volunteers who were African American or Latino; at the close of the demonstration grant, 34% percent of our volunteers were from communities of color.

Diversity brings many gifts - we learn from each other, we learn how to better hear and understand the children we serve as well as their parents and foster parents. Most importantly, we are better equipped to be a truer voice for those children - speaking up for them in tones, words, phrases, accents that reinforce their unique needs and strengths.

We hope this manual will be useful to programs as they take up this challenging and important work.