

VI TRAINING AND RETAINING VOLUNTEERS

Considering the Needs of Volunteers

CASA programs must consider several important conditions and requirements that may help facilitate volunteers' participation during training. Provision of these will potentially demonstrate a program's capacity for accommodation and flexibility in their dealings with CASA volunteers. Without adequate supports, prospective volunteers may be unwilling to volunteer, may drop out of the program during the training process, or may show a semi-committed attitude to volunteering for CASA.

Child Care

Persons willing to volunteer for CASA programs may be individuals having multiple family responsibilities. Being available for training for these persons means having someone to watch their children during scheduled training times. A coordinated effort to provide child care will be an essential strategy otherwise volunteers needing this service may only make the scheduled training sessions when child care is provided. Having child care available has the potential to make parent volunteers more receptive to volunteering and may also convey CASA's capacity to accommodate the needs of parent volunteers in exchange for their invaluable expertise.

Food

Having food available during training is also a plus to generate enthusiasm for volunteering and committed participation. Keep in mind, food in communities of color means love, connection, and is often interpreted as an indication that the person, or agency offering the food is extending themselves with 'good will'. Furthermore, if training sessions are scheduled during the late afternoon or evening, volunteers may have missed dinner, or rushed through a brief meal in order to attend the training. Under these conditions, having food available such as heavy snacks, a light pasta meal, or home made baked goods may convey an understanding of the sacrifice being made by volunteers in their efforts to attend the training session.

Transportation

Providing assistance with transportation is an excellent way to eliminate a possible barrier to volunteering. CASA staff should initiate efforts to organize rides among volunteers, and where this is not possible, offer financial help to secure public transportation (bus tokens). Traveling together has the added benefit of volunteers learning from and supporting one another during and following the training period.

Time

An important consideration for CASA programs is understanding the time constraints of CASA volunteers. Persons from communities of color may have severe demands on their time due to family configuration, or economic hardship. In view of this, it is very important to provide prospective volunteers with a realistic explanation of the time requirement of a CASA volunteer. For highly interested persons with very demanding schedules, it may be necessary for CASA professional staff to pitch in and share cases. Flexibility among the CASA professional staff will be imperative if programs are to avoid losing excellent prospective volunteers who may have very demanding schedules and family lives.

Incentives to Enhance Retention of Volunteers

The following is a list of suggestions to facilitate the retention of volunteers. Be mindful that each CASA program is different, and volunteers in these programs may have differing needs for validation. If, when, or how frequently to apply the following suggestions is open to the CASA staff's interpretation and the needs of volunteers. It is a broad guide, so feel free to skip an item or add a few of your own.

- \$ Although many programs make regular contact with volunteers for emotional support and case management, consider making more frequent phone contact with volunteers who seem to need extra support.
- \$ When making phone contact, stay positive. Rather than focusing on what has not been completed, focus on what needs to be done.
- \$ During phone contacts, be mindful of your people skills – – be personal (show an interests in the family, or any personal concern which a volunteer has discussed with you in the past). Later, if they indicate, offer assistance with their CASA case.
- \$ Make phone contact with volunteers waiting for a case to keep them inspired and their interest alive while they wait. Remember, some volunteers may need more contact than others.
- \$ If a volunteer is unsuccessful at a particular task, be prepared to problem solve, offer suggestions, or provide assistance until they develop confidence.
- \$ When volunteers receive their first case, be prepared to hand hold. Initial contact with the family and the child can be big moments that are overwhelming for some new volunteers.
- \$ Help new volunteers establish working relationships with the family, child, and foster family. They may be anxious about going into the home, or worry about how they will be received by the family, etc. Hand hold and assist with both easy and more difficult relationship contacts until volunteers get their footing.

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§ Be open to different interpersonal and problem solving styles, and show respect for all. Middle class, working class, college educated, or some high school – all have something unique and important to contribute to CASA.

Incentives

When encouraging prospective volunteer to donate their time to child advocacy, be conversant and prepared to discuss incentives that extend beyond monetary compensation, or the emotional satisfaction that comes from offering help to a needy child. CASA volunteers learn new skills that are assets in the human service field, are exposed to a variety of training opportunities, and also develop extensive networks with social service and community agencies. With increased exposure to a variety of vocational options, some volunteers acknowledge that CASA has encouraged them to consider new career goals, or inspired them to attend college in search of a new vocation. Hence, incentives for CASA volunteers can be both immediate and long-term, tangible, as well as, intangible – – inspirational.

Diversity Issues Affecting Volunteers

CASA programs that acknowledge and value diversity understand that working in a multicultural environment presents certain challenges. Below are a few of the diversity issues affecting CASA volunteers as they work with professional staff of CASA, human service social institutions, and CASA families.

Devaluation

CASA volunteers of color must interface with human service social institutions and agencies which they often perceive as openly hostile and insensitive to their cultural values, belief systems, and child rearing practices. While investigating a CASA case, they speak of consistent questioning of their qualifications and a challenge regarding their capacity to assume the volunteer responsibilities. The constant questioning and lack of respect, undermines their confidence, assaults their psyches, and makes CASA volunteers feel devalued by the institutions for which they generously volunteer their time.

Access Difficulties

CASA volunteers may experience difficulty gaining access to important information held by human service social institutions in their quest to investigate a CASA case. Some acknowledge feeling devalued and consistently questioned by human service staff which hampers their efforts to gather information. Access difficulties elongates the investigation process and stifles the efforts of volunteers to do a thorough job of advocating for the best interest of children. CASA volunteers look forward to and desire to be valued for their life experience and willingness to serve despite their educational attainment, social class status, or racial classification.

Mainstream Reticence

As a result of the aforementioned process of devaluation, and difficulty gaining access, some CASA volunteers, perhaps volunteers of color, come to a CASA case with a great deal of reticence. They may interact with human service staff in a soft spoken, or unsure manner fearing that they will not be well received. Sadly, institutional staff may not interpret these mannerisms as reticence, but may perceive them as a lack of skill, or training on the part of CASA volunteers. In this way, each plays into and contributes to the preconceptions about the other, that is, the attitude of human service staff creates a self-fulfilling prophecy regarding CASA volunteers. This dynamic makes the job of CASA volunteers particularly challenging.

Encourage Volunteers to Share Cross-Cultural Experiences

Sharing cross-cultural experiences creates the opportunity for all CASA volunteers to learn from one another and be enriched by the experience. The benefits of cross-cultural exchanges that emerge for CASA volunteers:

- \$ Develop an appreciation for the similarities, as well as, the differences that a diverse group of volunteers bring to a case when there is an open sharing and exchange of ideas, techniques, and cultural interpretation of experiences.
- \$ Learn that two people, from their respective cultural backgrounds, can each observe the same phenomenon and offer two differing assessments of a situation.
- \$ Understand that the differing perspectives that two people, observing the same phenomenon, bring to an assessment are based on their unique life experiences, racial and/or cultural background – with the associated value systems, beliefs, and traditions.
- \$ Appreciate that there may be multiple solutions to a problem and that each is equally valid. They develop a willingness to look beyond their customary way of approaching a problem and appreciate that several solutions can lead to the same outcome, on behalf of the best interest of children.
- \$ Develop an appreciation for the parenting style of parents from working class and poor families. They come to the understanding that poverty, in and of itself, does not make one a “bad” parent, and that families from these communities love, and have the same wishes, hopes, and dreams for their children as parents from other class backgrounds.
- \$ Begin to look beyond biased thinking, stereotypes, and misconceptions about other cultural groups ---- on the basis of classifications such as race, religion,

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class, gender, age, ability, family configuration, sexual orientation, educational achievement, etc.

Utilizing Diversity

The cultivation of diversity begins with acknowledging the racial, ethnic, and cultural make up of staff and the hiring of new staff to rectify any deficits. However, once diversification of staff is completed, the emergent concern is the ability of management to make optimum use of the skills, abilities, and unique talents that a diverse staff brings to an agency, or organization. CASA programs would be wise to understand that there is a difference between **having** diversity and **using** diversity.

When making decisions, consider how best to utilize the broad array of diversity of your staff:

- \$ Utilize differing interpersonal styles and personality types. (Possible pairings: active/passive, high strung/laid back, etc.)
- \$ Make use of life experience, skills and training. (Give more difficult cases to more experienced volunteers) (Match experienced volunteers with the newly trained.)
- \$ Take age under advisement when matching a family with a volunteer. (Young mothers often enjoy working with an older, experienced woman; young fathers, an experienced man.)
- \$ Select volunteers to work with families that share the same language. (Although many families speak English as a second language, some prefer to speak in their native tongue.)
- \$ When assigning cases, select volunteers that share racial or cultural identities with the family. (Although not always necessary, or possible, some families prefer and are more forthcoming with a volunteer having a shared racial, or cultural background.)
- \$ Show respect for religious or cultural traditions, even when they offend your sense of political correctness. (Some cultural or religious groups may not respond to, or respect female authority figures and must work with male volunteers.)
- \$ When a case poses difficult or unusual issues, consult a volunteer, or staff member with a different point of view. (Two people observing the same phenomenon may have two different, yet equally valid assessments.)

- § Volunteers should be sensitive to socio-economic issues when considering whether certain conduct of a parent is a function of poverty, or child neglect. (“Cramped” living quarters, or a messy home may disturb a social worker’s idea of an optimum home environment, however it does not make one an ineffective parent.) (Skipping breakfast, an occasional unbalanced meal, or having meat two meals a day should not be misconstrued as nutritional neglect.)