



POLICY AND PROCEDURE MANUAL

FOR VOLUNTEERS

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CASA for Lancaster County
1141 H Street, Suite C
Lincoln, NE 68508
(402) 474-5161
www.casa4lancaster.org



WELCOME TO **CASA** FOR LANCASTER COUNTY!

Dear Volunteer,

CASA for Lancaster County is pleased to welcome you as a volunteer with our program. Since 1999, **CASA for Lancaster County** has advocated for children in our court and child welfare systems. Therefore, as a volunteer, you are a critical component in the advocacy efforts of this program.

This manual will provide you with the policies and procedures of this CASA program. This manual is not a contract and does not guarantee any fixed terms and conditions of a volunteer's participation in this CASA program. It is information that we would like you to become familiar with and follow. Your commitment to these policies and procedures will make **CASA for Lancaster County** a stronger and more effective program. It will also help us maintain a level of professionalism, which is an integral part of CASA.

After the one year commitment we ask of each volunteer, your service as a volunteer will last only as long as you agree. However, **CASA for Lancaster County** is looking forward to having a long and beneficial relationship with you and with all our other volunteers.

We encourage any suggestions you may have for improving our services or our policies and procedures manual. We have an "open door" policy. Therefore, if you have any problems or questions concerning the policies and procedures outlined in this manual, we want you to feel comfortable enough to take the matter up directly with me.

Sincerely,

Dawn Rockey
Executive Director

*To give a child a CASA is to give them a voice. To give them a voice
is to give them hope, and to give them hope is to give them the world.
Pamela B., former CASA child*

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General Program Policies and Procedures

Purpose of Policies and Procedures

The **purpose** of these policies and procedures is to provide overall guidance and direction to persons serving as volunteers for **CASA for Lancaster County**. They do not constitute, either implicitly or explicitly, a binding contractual or personnel agreement. **CASA for Lancaster County** reserves the right to change any of these policies and procedures at any time and expect adherence to the changed policy. Areas specifically not addressed by these policies and procedures shall be determined by the Executive Director and/or the Board¹. Volunteers will be required to sign an acknowledgement indicating that they have read, understood, and will comply with all the policies and procedures. Volunteers will be notified of any changes made to this policy and procedure manual.

Discrimination

CASA for Lancaster County promotes equal employment opportunities to all applicants/employees/volunteers by prohibiting discriminatory policies concerning any individual or group based on race, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, physical or mental disability, color, gender, age, marital status, political affiliation, military status, or veteran status.

Staff and volunteers are admonished that racial slurs, ethnic jokes or other disparaging remarks or conduct based on race, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, physical or mental disability, color, gender, age, marital status, political affiliation, military status, or veteran status are never appropriate in the work place.

CASA for Lancaster County will take prompt and immediate action to investigate instances of reported misconduct. Any employee or volunteer found to be in violation of this policy will be subject to disciplinary action, up to and including termination.

Sexual Harassment

CASA for Lancaster County affirms that all women and men are to be treated fairly and equally, with dignity and respect. We strive to achieve a working environment that is professional and supportive to all individuals.

Sexual harassment is defined to be any unsolicited behavior, which asserts a person's sex as a factor of his/her function as an employee, or volunteer. It includes any unwanted sexual behavior, comments, suggestions, physical contact; propositions backed by implied or actual threats of losing or lowering work, and/or forced sexual relations. Sexual harassment does not include personal compliments welcomed by the

¹ The term "Board" is meant to include a Board of Directors, an Advisory Board, or any other oversight board or committee.

recipient, or social interaction or relationships freely entered into by the individuals involved.

CASA for Lancaster County will take prompt and immediate action to investigate instances of reported misconduct. Any employee or volunteer found to be in violation of this policy will be subject to disciplinary action, up to and including termination.

Alcohol/Drug Use

CASA for Lancaster County is committed to providing an environment that is safe. Staff and volunteers are role models for persons using this program's services. **CASA for Lancaster County** endorses the philosophy that the workplace should be free from the detrimental effects of alcohol and/or illegal drugs. There will be no differentiation between someone who illegally uses drugs and someone that sells or distributes drugs.

Being under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs is prohibited and is cause for disciplinary action, up to and including termination.

VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION

The following information shall be included in the volunteer application: educational background; employment history; personal experience with child abuse or neglect; full name, AKA's, and maiden name; social security number; date of birth; and residence for the previous seven (7) years.

Also included with the volunteer application will be the names and addresses for three references and release of information forms to be sent to the Nebraska Child Abuse/Neglect Central Registry, One Source, The Background Check Company, and the Nebraska Department of Motor Vehicles. Background check includes local, state and federal criminal record check, social security number verification, child/adult abuse registry and sex offender registry for current and all past addresses (7 years) if outside Lincoln (Lancaster County).

Once CASA for Lancaster County program staff (staff includes all paid CASA for Lancaster County staff) receives and reviews all aforesaid information, a staff member may determine that an applicant does or does not qualify to become a volunteer. If the staff member determines a volunteer does not qualify, the staff member will contact him or her that he or she does not qualify to be a volunteer. Such disqualification (prior to training) can be appealed to the Executive Director.

CASA program staff may determine at any time during the screening and training process, including prior to assigning the volunteer a case that the volunteer does not qualify to be a volunteer. The volunteer will be notified by the Executive Director if such a determination is made. Disqualification by the Executive Director prior to a case being assigned may not be appealed to the Board, unless it can be shown that the Executive

Director disqualified a volunteer in violation of **CASA for Lancaster County** policy on discrimination or sexual harassment.

VOLUNTEER FILES

A file of all the volunteers and applicants shall remain confidential and will be maintained in a locked file cabinet and/or in a secured database on a computer in the program office. However, such files may be shared with other programs or the Nebraska CASA Association, if the circumstance arises. All volunteer files shall contain the following: application; background checks; references; volunteer oath; statement of commitment; the letter of acknowledgement from the policy and procedure manual; evaluations; and documentation of any disciplinary action. All volunteers are responsible to report any changes of address, telephone or other pertinent information to the Executive Director or to CASA program staff.

VOLUNTEER TRAINING

CASA FOR LANCASTER COUNTY provides volunteers with an initial 30 hours of training. Topics include: the roles and responsibilities of a volunteer and other professionals; permanency planning; confidentiality; cultural competency; child abuse and neglect; juvenile court process; dynamics of families including mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence and poverty; relevant state laws and regulations; relevant federal laws and regulations; child development; community agencies and available resources; effective advocacy and observation of court. At this time, the volunteer will also be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement and a letter of commitment. All volunteers must complete the training before they will be assigned a case.

Upon successful completion of training, the volunteer will be sworn-in as a Court Appointed Special Advocate by a judge of the Juvenile Court of Lancaster County.

Continued training is essential to ensuring a volunteer's success. **CASA for Lancaster County** is required to offer twelve (12) hours in-service training throughout the year and all volunteer are expected to participate. However, if a volunteer is unable to attend specific in-service training, but is able to participate in relevant programming on his or her own, **CASA for Lancaster County** will count those hours towards the 12 hour requirement. Volunteers are responsible for having such programming authorized by the Executive Director prior to attending. **CASA for Lancaster County** will also notify volunteers of outside training opportunities available in the community and surrounding area. Volunteer may also be asked to provide documentation that the volunteer attended the programming.

VOLUNTEER CASE ASSIGNMENT

CASA program staff will try to match a volunteer with a case based on the preferences of the volunteer. A volunteer has the right to refuse a case assignment for any reason.

Once a volunteer accepts a case, he or she must sign a certificate of acceptance to be maintained in the case file. The volunteer will then receive any documentation necessary to manage his or her case, including, but not limited to, the court order appointing him or her as the CASA. CASA program staff is responsible for introducing the volunteer to all the parties of the case and/or providing the volunteer with contact information for all the parties of the case, verifying the volunteer's appointment.

The volunteer shall maintain a case file at his or her residence. Such file must be placed in a secure place to ensure that all information remains confidential. **CASA for Lancaster County** will also maintain an office file of the case in a locked file cabinet.

Volunteers must submit a court report or any other required documentation at all court hearings. Exceptions to this may only be made by CASA program staff. CASA program staff shall review all court reports, documentation, and correspondence, and staff is responsible for distributing the reports to all the parties to the case.

Court reports/documentation should be completed for review and provided to CASA program staff no less than 5 working days prior to the court hearing, unless the volunteer makes other arrangements with a staff member.

At the conclusion of the volunteer's involvement with the case, including resignation by or termination of the volunteer, the volunteer shall return the entire case file to CASA for Lancaster County! This includes, but is not limited to, all original documentation of the volunteer's appointment to the case, court documents, documentation of phone calls or other interviews, any correspondence, medical records or other assessments, and any and all personal notes on the case.

PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

Ultimate responsibility for all CASA cases rests with the Executive Director. However, the volunteer also represents **CASA for Lancaster County**, and what you say and do in the courtroom and in the community reflects on the program. Always try to conduct yourself in a manner that reflects favorably on **CASA for Lancaster County**.

Dress – volunteers should dress appropriately for court and meetings with other community agencies. If you have any questions about what to wear, please call the CASA office.

Gift Giving – volunteers should not give money, extravagant gifts, or purchase clothing for the children that they are advocating for. In addition, volunteers are prohibited from giving money or gifts to the child's family or caregiver. Applications can

be made to the CASA Kids Activity Fund to pay for activities or items needed by the child.

Providing Direct Service – volunteers are restricted from providing direct services such as, but not limited to: transporting parties, intervening in domestic disputes, providing counseling, giving legal advice, offering to provide funds for food or other necessities, or making placement arrangements. Volunteers are prohibited from taking a child to the volunteer’s home, place of business or any home other than the child’s. **Volunteers are facilitators**; volunteers advocate for the direct service agencies to provide these services to the families the volunteers advocate for. Volunteers can request permission to transport a CASA child but must adhere to the Transportation Policy for Staff and Volunteers. It requires volunteers to carry state minimum insurance. The full policy is available from the CASA for Lancaster County Office.

Volunteers shall not provide direct service delivery to any party involved in their cases that could (a) lead to a conflict of interest or liability problems, or (b) cause a child or family to become dependent on the volunteer for services that should be provided by other agencies or organizations.

Public Speaking/Media – volunteers are encouraged to speak about the program in general throughout the community. However, inquiries concerning **CASA for Lancaster County**, its policies, practices, or clients must be referred to the Executive Director. Volunteers are prohibited from making any statements to the media involving the program or on behalf of the program.

Involvement with the Legal/Welfare System – volunteers must immediately notify the program if the volunteer is charged with or convicted of a criminal offense, or becomes involved in any other court proceeding which might cause a conflict of interest or adversely affect the volunteer’s ability to effectively advocate for a child. This includes notifying the program if the volunteer or any member of the volunteer’s immediate family becomes involved in a case with allegations of child abuse or neglect.

Decline Appointment, Withdraw or Request Assistance - volunteers that recognize that they may not have the time or ability to effectively advocate for a child should decline to be appointed withdraw or request assistance.

Conflict of Interest – volunteers’ effectiveness and standing in court depend on them maintaining professional relationships with children and families. Volunteers should not become personally involved with the children and their families. This includes not being related to or developing intimate, social or other nonprofessional relationships with any person connected to the case or being employed in a position that might result in a conflict of interest. Volunteers must notify staff of any conflicts or potential conflicts at the time they occur. Unreported conflicts could result in a volunteer’s dismissal.

Communication with Parties – volunteers are prohibited from giving counseling; legal advice; misrepresenting the role or position of a volunteer; or engaging in any ex parte² conversation with a judge.

Confidentiality – volunteers become officers of the court upon appointment to a case. Any information pertaining to the children or families, including the foster families, which the volunteers receive in the course of their duties, is strictly confidential. Discussion of the case may only take place with those directly involved with the case. No discussions of any children or family situations of any kind are to be held in hallways, elevators or other public places. Should there be a question as to whom volunteers may speak to about the case, please contact your Volunteer Coordinator or the Executive Director.

All volunteers must sign the volunteer statement of commitment which specifically states “I will discuss matters only with those persons who are directly involved with the case”. Not adhering to these guidelines could result in a volunteer’s dismissal.

Duty to Disclose: Exceptions to Confidentiality – volunteers are not protected by privilege, like a doctor-patient or lawyer-client relationship. It is the volunteers’ responsibility to transmit the information they collect to the parties and the court. At the beginning of the case, volunteers should carefully inform all the parties regarding what records will be maintained about them and what information will be shared, with whom, and under what circumstances.

Volunteers have a duty to immediately disclose instances where the volunteers suspect (1) Child abuse and/or neglect; (2) Someone showing serious and imminent harm of her/himself or others. Such disclosure should be to the Department of Health and Human Services (Abuse Hotline) or the police. Volunteers that have a question about disclosure should immediately call their Volunteer Coordinator or the Executive Director.

COMPLAINTS AND GRIEVANCES

Every effort should be made to solve problems cooperatively and informally before presenting them as a formal grievance. Should informal efforts fail, the following policy and procedure is set forth in order to provide an outlet for complaints and a systematic means to resolve grievances. All complaints will receive thoughtful consideration and will be discussed. Complaints and grievances may arise from external (outside the immediate program) or internal (within the program) sources.

External – Because volunteers are involved with work that impacts the future lives of children and families, this emotionally charged work evokes a wide range of feeling from all the parties involved. It is therefore common and expected that there

² The Nebraska Supreme Court has stated “an ex parte communication occurs when a judge communicates with any person concerning a pending or impending proceeding without notice to an adverse party.” *State v. Lotter*, 255 Neb. 456 (1998)

may be criticism from the parties. Should a complaint arise from someone outside **CASA for Lancaster County**, the Executive Director will discuss the complaint with the volunteer. The Director is responsible for deciding if the complaint has any validity and may request a written statement from the party initiating the complaint. In addition, the Executive Director, with advice from the board, may determine what action, if any, should be taken.

Internal – When a volunteer wishes to make a complaint with a policy, practice, condition or Executive Director’s decision, it is encouraged that the volunteer should first try to discuss the matter informally with the Executive Director. If this is not an option or the problem is not resolved to the volunteer’s satisfaction, he or she should contact the board president to discuss the issue. If the issue is still not resolved, the volunteer should place the complaint in writing to be submitted to the all the members of the board for discussion. The board must provide the volunteer with a written response outlining its position.

If the volunteer still feels that the problem is not resolved to the volunteer’s satisfaction, he or she should contact the Executive Director of the Nebraska CASA Association, 1618 L Street, Lincoln, NE 68508, 402-477-2788, www.nebraskacasa.org.

EVALUATIONS

Volunteers will be evaluated. Periodic evaluations help **CASA for Lancaster County** sustain long and mutually productive relationships with our volunteers. If **CASA for Lancaster County** determines that its best interests are not being served, it may work with the volunteer to develop a plan to improve his or her efforts or may choose to terminate the relationship.

Evaluations may also come as the result of verbal or written warnings.

Volunteers are encouraged to use the evaluation sessions to discuss areas of concern and to make suggestions about improving the volunteer program.

All evaluations will be maintained in the volunteer’s file.

DISCIPLINE

The purpose of discipline is to correct volunteer misconduct or to improve performance. Depending on the circumstances, misconduct will result in disciplinary action, which may include a verbal warning, written warning, or dismissal. Verbal and written warnings will be administered by the Executive Director and a record of such will be placed in the volunteer’s file.

DISMISSAL

Dismissal of a volunteer will normally follow **CASA for Lancaster County** evaluation and discipline policies. Dismissal of a volunteer is the responsibility of the Executive Director, who reserves the right to dismiss “at will,” the final decision, of which, can be appealed to the Board.

Immediate dismissal will take place only in the most serious of circumstances. Grounds for dismissal may include, but are not limited to:

- (a) Taking immediate action without **CASA for Lancaster County** or court approval that endangers the child or is outside the role of the volunteer or the program;
- (b) Knowingly and intentionally violating a program policy, court rule or law;
- (c) Demonstrating an inability to effectively carry out the duties of a volunteer;
- (d) Demonstrating gross misconduct or insubordination;
- (e) Failing to complete required pre-service and in-service training;
- (f) Being under the influence of alcohol or drugs while performing the duties of a volunteer;
- (g) Lying or falsifying records or any other documents;
- (h) Failing to timely report any criminal charges filed against you;
- (i) Existence of child abuse/neglect allegations against you;
- (j) Existence of a conflict of interest which cannot be resolved; or
- (k) Any behavior in conflict with the best interest of the CASA program deemed serious in nature by the board and/or Executive Director.

RESIGNATION OR LEAVE OF ABSENCE

Volunteers may at any time, for whatever reason, decide to resign from their volunteer service with **CASA for Lancaster County**. It is requested that the volunteer resign orally or in writing. CASA program staff will then send out a letter of verification to the volunteer, of a copy of which will be placed in the volunteer’s file.

Should a volunteer want to become active again without repeating the initial training, then he or she must contact the **CASA for Lancaster County** within one (1) year of resigning. They may have to participate in an interview with CASA program staff. If the volunteer fails to contact the program within one (1) year, then he or she must repeat the initial training and may also have to go through the screening process.

Once a volunteer “closes” a case, he or she may choose not to be immediately appointed to another case. He or she should notify CASA program staff of such either orally or in writing. CASA program staff will then send out a letter of verification to the volunteer, a copy of which will be placed in the volunteer’s file.

A volunteer may continue to be on “leave of absence” status for two (2) years. However, such volunteer must continue to participate in in-service training and attend any other events that must be attended by “active” volunteers. Failure to do so will result in an automatic dismissal.

SAFETY

These safety procedures have been established in order to give volunteers guidelines on avoiding possible harmful situations during visits:

- (a) Dress in a fashion that is casual and not conspicuous. Avoid wearing or exposing expensive jewelry. Do not carry a large sum of money.
- (b) Exercise maximum care and good judgement at all times to prevent accidents and injuries. If any kind of accident or injury does occur, the volunteer should report it to the CASA program staff.
- (c) Before going on a visit, verify the appropriate route with the Volunteer Coordinator or Executive Director or become familiar with the area a few days prior to stopping for a visit.
- (d) If you are concerned about visiting a home or any other place, ask the Volunteer Coordinator, other CASA program staff or another experienced volunteer to go with you on a visit.
- (e) Always let someone know where you are and how long you plan to be gone on the visit.
- (f) Visits with children should take place in a public place or with other adults in the near vicinity to avoid claims of misconduct.
- (g) If you have a cellular phone, take it with you and have it on.
- (h) Upon approaching a building or other area, if you do not feel totally comfortable for whatever reason, DO NOT ENTER the building or the area. A visit can be made at another time and arrangements can be made to have someone accompany you.

CASA for Lancaster County – Diversity Statement

CASA for Lancaster County provides equal volunteer and employment opportunities to all applicants without regard to race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, national origin, age, disability, military status, or military veteran status in accordance with applicable federal and state laws. In addition, CASA for Lancaster County agrees to provide a volunteer and work environment that is free of unlawful harassment of any kind, including that which is sexual, age-related or ethnic when the volunteer and work environment is within CASA's control.

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